

## The Last-Ditch Efforts of Wayward Boys by marsza

**Category:** Stranger Things (TV 2016)

**Genre:** Canon-Typical Violence, Character Study, Child Abuse, Enemies to Friends to Lovers, Explicit Sexual Content, Homophobia, Hurt/Comfort, M/M, Mutual Pining, Slow Burn, Therapy, if the Duffer bros won't give my trash son the redemption arc he deserves I will

**Language:** English

**Characters:** Billy Hargrove, Jim "Chief" Hopper, Jonathan Byers, Lucas Sinclair, Maxine "Max" Mayfield, Nancy Wheeler, Original Characters, Robin Buckley, Steve Harrington, Tommy H. (Stranger Things)

**Relationships:** Billy Hargrove/Steve Harrington

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**Summary:**

The night that Billy is sent out to find Max doesn't end when he wakes up on the Byers' living room floor. Instead, his father's rage reaches new heights and Billy finds himself at the end of his rope. When his only chance out of Hawkins lands him in counseling and partnered up with Steve Harrington of all people, Billy expects to play his part until he's in the clear and back in California for good — but his life has seldom ever gone according to plan and, as it turns out, Billy's not the only boy in town haunted and scarred and desperate for one last shred of hope.

# 1. Chapter 1

## Notes for the Chapter:

Please be mindful of the content warnings. This project will contain depictions of physical and emotional child abuse. This chapter contains both.

“We have not touched the stars, nor are we forgiven, which brings us back to the hero’s shoulders and the gentleness that comes, not from the absence of violence, but despite the abundance of it.”

- Snow and Dirty Rain, Richard Siken

By the time Billy Hargrove wakes up on the Byers’ dining room floor, the bruises on his face have already begun to welt.

He struggles and fails to get up off the floor and a dull realization rises from the fog in Billy’s head: *something’s wrong with him*. Something has been done to him. He’s been in enough fights to last him a lifetime, but he’s never felt anything like this before. Disoriented. Mixed up. It’s as though the signals between his body and his brain have been scrambled. He touches the raised skin of his neck, swollen from where his sister had stabbed him with the sharp end of a syringe, and pain burst from it like an electric shock. He jolts from the pain. When he tries to sit up, the floor tilts on its axis, anchoring him to the ground instead.

Groaning where he lays, Billy tries to think. He can’t remember where he is. He can’t remember how even he got here. He tries to make sense of the sequence of things, running over the details of hours long past with sluggish difficulty.

He remembers his father hitting him. He remembers being thrown out on the street to find his sister. He remembers getting into his car and slamming his foot against the gas pedal, his eyes brimming with humiliated tears. He remembers meeting Mrs. Wheeler and how she didn’t know where Max was, but knew well enough to look at Billy

all hungry, like he was something to be devoured. He remembers Lucas Sinclair. He remembers Max's white-knuckled hands around a baseball bat.

Worst of all, he remembers Harrington. All that he'd done to Steve Harrington.

He remembers shards of the plate he'd smash over Harrington's head later crunching under his boots. The metallic taste of blood in Billy's mouth and the warmth of it over his fists. He remembers the heat of his anger and he remembers the strange, unexplainable sensation that Billy had been watching himself from outside of his own body. As if he weren't really there, as if his fists had been moving on their own. He remembers hitting Harrington, again and again and again, until his face against Billy's knuckles felt clammy and wet, but he can't remember if Harrington ever woke up.

Well, *fuck*.

The house is empty and Max is gone. There's no sign of her left in the Byers house and there's no way of knowing where she is now either. Still, Billy can't go home without her. He knows that the sooner he hits the road, the better chance he'll have at finding her, even if that means driving around with no real sense of where he's going. He digs into the pockets sluggishly, until a realization hits him like a shock of cold water, his blood immediately running cold: His pockets are empty.

His keys are gone.

How are they gone? He hasn't lost them. He *knows* he hasn't lost them. *No*. No, this can't be happening. The ground is still spinning beneath him when he scrambles to his knees, crawling weakly across the living room floor, glass digging into his legs through his jeans. Never mind the pain. There'll be more where that came from besides. The only thing that matters now is making it out of this house. He just has to get on his feet again. He just has to make it out the door and to his car – that's where the keys will be, that's where *they have*

*to be*, he must've left the keys in the car—

He opens the front door with every shred of strength and sobriety left in him and then he stares- he stares at the wide, empty space where his blue Camaro should be.

Whether it's shock or panic or the after-effect of whatever Max jammed into his neck, Billy keels over, bile spilling over his boots. The car is gone. Max is missing. His dad is going to kill him.

He needs to think.

He needs to *do* something.

*He needs to breathe.*

He's breathing hard around the panic building up in his chest. He needs to find Max. He needs to find his car. Billy weighs the two needs against each other in his mind, trying to estimate which of the two losses his father will more likely forgive, but no matter which way he imagines it, the scales never move in his favor.

Billy can't go home without either Max or the car, but that's precisely the problem.

He has nowhere else to go.

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When he was a kid, Billy imagined he'd become immune to his father, as if it were the inevitable consequence of growing older. When Neil slammed doors, Billy imagined himself unflinching. When Neil hit him, he imagined himself hitting back. For as long as he could remember, Billy imagined himself big and strong and loud, frightening enough to ward off his father and make the hurting stop. He figured he'd at least learn how to take a punch like real men do, with his head held high and without forfeiting any dignity or crying or begging him to stop.

It hadn't worked out that way, of course. The fear Neil instills in Billy is the all-consuming sort, the kind of fear that transforms people into things that only know they can die. It's the sort of fear that never vanishes, only changes.

It's that same fear that forces Billy onto his unsteady feet despite the sedative still running through his veins. It's that same fear that sets Billy marching off into the biting cold of a December night in Hawkins, Illinois.

Not knowing if he's trembling from the cold, the fear, or the drugs, Billy tries to think of California. He thinks of home: open skies, blazing summers, the smell of the sea in the air when it rains. He thinks of the way a home can wane smaller and smaller when you're thrown in a car headed to Illinois and torn from the only place you've ever known. He thinks of old neighbors and lost friends. He thinks of boys who tasted ocean-salt off Billy's skin. He thinks of the man that lived four blocks down from Billy's old place and the stories he used to tell about Vietnam, about platoons of men wading unknowingly into their swamp-water graves.

Billy looks back only once, the Byers' house now only a flicker of light in the distance, and he wonders if pain comes any easier when you don't see it coming at all.

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By the time Billy comes home, hopeless and empty-handed, Max has beat him there by an hour and a half. Locked out of the house without his keys, Billy stood by the front-door for what felt like a lifetime. He'd hardly started knocking before the door swung open, his father fuming and red-faced on the other side. Like most violence, it all happens quickly. The thump of being slammed against the nearest wall, the hard smack of his father's hand across his mouth, the pop of Billy's jaw, like a ball crackling against the swing of a bat. But then Neil slows. He stops. More importantly, he stops too soon.

"Get on your feet and go to your room," Neil says, sounding exhausted and disgusted all at once. Billy looks up at him from the floor warily. He watches the muscle of his father's jaw shift. "Don't make me repeat myself, boy."

Something's wrong. Neil is never one to skim punishment. Painful though it had been, two or three blows can't be enough to satisfy. Discipline, his father once told him, deserves its due time. Billy knows well enough that trouble is far from over.

Whatever is going to happen next is going to happen in Billy's room.

Billy gets to his feet as expected, consciously making sure not to stumble or wince as he does. He walks to his room with the careful consideration of someone trying to avoid a landmine. He can hear his father following along behind him. What is Neil planning? What kind of game is this? Billy keeps his head low, his eyes downcast. He makes himself small. When he opens the bedroom door, he doesn't turn around to look at his father, though he can feel his eyes scouring him, waiting for a reaction. Billy focuses ahead instead, his chest tightening all the while.

The room is completely ruined. *Of course*, Billy thinks bitterly. *Of fucking course*.

Billy paces inside, trying to imagine Neil storming into his room. He imagines his father throwing over the furniture, tearing down all of Billy's posters and photographs. Shattering the mirror. Stripping the room down to its bones. Billy's stereo set, one of the only things he'd been allowed to bring with him to Hawkins from Oakland, looks like it'd been smashed through with a wrench. His collection of cassettes are scattered across the floor in a mess of plastic shards and torn tape. Sure, Billy's room had always been a shithole, but it was distinctly his in a way few things ever are. Now everything is ruined.

"You've got a real mess in here, son. If I were you, I'd get to cleaning," Neil says, leaning against the doorframe. His father's voice is calm, almost amused, but there's a visible anger simmering beneath his forced composure. When Billy stares, the hard, thin line of Neil's mouth twists into a scowl. "What? Am I speaking Chinese? Clear your mess."

*Clean.* So that's the rule of this game. Billy can do that. He moves quickly, rushing to the kitchen and returning with silent diligence with a broom and pail in hand. He sweeps the glass from the floor and sets his furniture upright, returning what remained unbroken to the spaces they once occupied. Neil watches in perfect silence, his presence gnawing at Billy's nerves. When the room is finally organized, he asks: "Are you finished?"

*Are you blind?* Billy swallows a sharp answer, tensing when his father

draws closer. Neil considers the room slowly, thoughtfully, giving the space a theatrical once-over and the occasional nod before he lays a hand on the newly organized vanity. With one firm push, it goes crashing back down to the floor.

"What the hell did you do that for?" Billy blurts out, immediately furious.

*"Excuse me?"* A terrifying glint flashes across Neil's eyes. "You'd do well to mind that tone. Remember who you're speaking to. I'm not one of your little friends." Billy tenses immediately, certain another blow will follow, but Neil walks past him. He goes to his son's dresser instead. Yanking one of its drawers out from its hinges, he throws it to the floor with a loud thud.

"Stop," Billy says. "Please, Dad, c'mon. I get it."

Neil wordlessly continues. Once the dresser has been completely ruined, all of Billy's clothes once again tossed across the floor, he moves onto the next corner of the room. Then the next.

Billy feels gutted. He stands uselessly, watching as everything that had been returned to its place is hurled over by his father with humiliating deliberation. He wants to act, to scream, to stop him, and he wants to sound venomous, but his voice has gone watery and weak: *"I get it ... I missed up ... I didn't mean to .. but Max was the one who-"*

The back of Neil's palm connects sharp against Billy's cheek and sends the boy back stumbling until his father pulls him forward by the collar of his shirt. "You'll keep her name out of your mouth, you understand? Blaming a child for your actions. You're *disgusting*. Max came home with the chief of police tonight. The fucking police, Billy, knocking on my door and bringing my daughter home like some thug. Is that acceptable?"

Neil's breath is hot against Billy's face. The collar of his shirt digs so hard into Billy's skin it hurts. It all hurts. He blinks through the haze of static from his eyes, realizing dully that his father is waiting for an answer. "No."

“So long as you live in my house,” Neil says, his dangerously hushed, “you put a sir on the end of it when you talk to me, you understand?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Do I keep a roof over your head, food on your plate, and clothes on your back so you can humiliate this family?”

Billy swallows against the bitter taste in his mouth. “No, sir.”

“I don’t you ask for much,” Neil says, throwing Billy off with a rough shove. “Do your share around the house. Watch out for your sister. Take care of what I give you. Never thought I’d have to tell you not to lose the fucking car, but you never cease to amaze me.”

Billy stares at him uselessly.

“I don’t know what it’s going to take to get you to act like a man,” Neil says. “A man takes care of his family. A man keeps his family safe, keeps their reputation clean. But you’re not a man, are you, Billy?”

“I am, sir” he replies quietly.

Neil laughs. “Is that right? Do you act like one? Do you look like one?”

Billy grinds his teeth. If he speaks the words running through his head, he’ll earn himself a trip to the hospital.

“Tomorrow morning Susan is going to tell me you paid her an apology,” his father tells him. “And when I ask Max if she got an apology, she’s going to say the same thing. I’m going to come home from work tomorrow evening and I’m going to see that goddamn car in my driveway. If you want to live in my house, waste my money, and fill your stomach with my food, you’re going learn how to clean your fucking messes. Starting right here, right now.”

Billy obeys. Under his father’s watch, he returns everything to its place. The cologne that had somehow survived Neil’s first outburst now rests in shattered pieces on the floor. One of the corner’s of Billy’s dresser has dented, nearly cracked. Once the room is clean,



Neil ruins it again and Billy, for his part, Billy doesn't so much as look his father in the eye.

He's seething. He knows better than to show it. He bites the wall of his cheek so hard he can taste the metallic tang of blood in his mouth, but he does as he's told without protest and without crying. That's victory enough. The third time around, Neil seems desperate for a reaction. He hands a garbage bag to Billy and demands he fill it with his clothes, his posters, his cassettes.

When his father tears his room apart a fourth time, completely emptying the garbage bag over Billy's bed, Billy loses all composure, his anger teeming over like the salt-water in his eyes.

The fifth time proves to be the last.

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In the dark morning hour, before anyone else in the family has woken up, Billy hurries to the bathroom. He hasn't slept. He never can after nights like these and, after years of experience, Billy knows better than to expect otherwise. Instead, Billy waits until his father has gone asleep, knowing that then Billy can clean himself up, assess the damage, and regain control.

He showers quickly, scrubbing the sweat and grime off his skin. He doesn't allow himself to focus on the dried blood caked beneath his fingernails. He doesn't linger on the fact that the blood isn't his own. Afterward, Billy takes a proper look at himself in the mirror. It'd been hard to register the damage in the dark, but now nothing is concealed. His lip is split. The corner of his mouth is splotted violet with a deep bruise. The side of his neck where Max hurt him has reddened to an angry, dry rash. The bruises on his face, Billy decides, look just as bad as they feel.

He pulls an old sweatshirt down over his head, careful to avoid his swollen nose. It looks hideously plain beneath his denim jacket, but it's practical. As much as Billy prefers his usual tight-fitting clothes, they'd only make his already sore body all the more uncomfortable—besides, a sweatshirt would cover him up well enough, warding off any dangerous questions.

It's been a while since Billy last had to dress with the wary caution of those who have wounds to hide.

He listens carefully for any sign that his father has woken up. When he finds none, Billy pushes past the thick miasma of fear in his chest and sneaks into the kitchen, where the garbage is still full of his things. Countless cassette tapes are piled up from the trash, their magnetic tapes disemboweled from their plastic shells and with them all the hours Billy spent by the radio trying to record his favorite tracks, all the months of pinching pennies so he could afford a long-awaited album.

He pockets the few cassettes that looked salvageable: *Ghost in the Machine*, *A Broken Frame*, and a mixtape one of Billy's friends had given him back in Oakland. He finds a shirt that hasn't been torn up by his father and stuffs it into his backpack. He'll have to wash it in the sink of the boy's room at school and keep it out of his father's sight for a while, at least until Neil forgets it enough to not recognize it on sight. Last, he steals back a crumpled postcard from when he'd visited Yellowstone with his mom, the age-worn paper now stained with grease and day-old spaghetti.

At the smallest sounds, Billy jumps. Shoving everything he can into his pockets, he looks for the source of the sound. He holds his breath. The door of his father's bedroom is cracked open, but it's Susan staring back at him from down the hall. They exchange a long, wordless look. Susan offers a pitying smile; Billy deliberately doesn't return it. When Billy bolts for the door, she tenses almost imperceptibly.

By the time Neil wakes up that morning, Billy has already decided to leave Hawkins, Indiana for good.

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

Billy Hargrove is a mess of a character. He's violent, prejudiced, and dickish *at best*. But he's also a seventeen year old victim of child abuse. He's a character that's worth caring about, imo, if only because he represents to me the ugliest aspects of surviving abuse that we too often don't speak about:

the maladaptive behaviors, the hatefulness, the desire to destroy as we've been destroyed. This story was born out of a desire to say that very few of us are beyond redemption and this project means a lot to me. So, too, does the prospect of Billy healing, finding stability, and falling in love with a certain floofy-haired Midwestern boy who's battling demons of his own. I hope you're stick around for the ride.

I've already tagged this fic as one that will contain depictions of physical and emotional abuse- some of this (though fortunately not all) will be drawing from personal experiences. That is to say my aim is never to be careless or gratuitous with these depictions. If in the process of reading this fic, you find something I have not tagged for which you would like to have been forewarned, please tell me so.

[I've got a running tag for this fic on tumblr.](#) You can also reach out to me there! And please don't forget to comment and subscribe. By the time you read this, I'll already have 3 more chapters ready for posting- but knowing that you guys are enjoying my fic motivate me to keep writing! Besides, I'll love you forever if you do! Doesn't that sweeten the pot?

I promise it's not all doom and gloom, guys. There's hope for jerks.

## 2. Chapter 2

Billy can't go to school in the condition he's in. He's been in this exact situation enough times before to know that fresh bruises only invite unwanted attention. He goes looking for his car instead. He exhausts the obvious places first: he checks the houses of Max's friends, the local chop-shop, and the junkyard. When they each come empty, he keeps walking.

Until now, Billy has never paid attention to how much Hawkins seemed to be withering at its edges. There's something unsettling about wandering past the outskirts of the town. It's as though Billy has wandered off to a place that's been depopulated by design. There's something rotten about Hawkins. He felt it when they first moved into town and he feels it even now.

Well, that won't be a problem for much longer.

By the time he reaches the quarry just outside of town, he's already decided where he'd be heading: back to California. Sure, it'd be harder to go back home to Oakland this far away from the West coast, but Billy doesn't belong in the midwest. He misses living in a place that bustles with life, where there's always something to do, something to see. He misses the smell of the ocean in the air. He misses the safety blanket of living in a city where nobody knows his name.

Hawkins is the furthest thing from that. It's a suffocating and boring town where privacy is a foreign concept. Billy hadn't even finished his first week at school before he'd been told all there was to know about Byers' freakish little brother, how Tommy H. cheated on the chick he'd been fucking since middle school, and how some mousey butch vanished last year.

Sure, he tried to stake a claim in Hawkins High: he found a few guys he could tolerate, swung fists at the ones he couldn't, and flirted with too many girls to name. But that's what Billy had always done when he started a new school- it's the only way to survive, really. He knows better than to genuinely believe anyone at school would ever actually give a shit.

Hell, he'd bet money nobody would even realize when he's gone.

Without wanting to, Billy's thoughts go back to last night's fight with Harrington. Not for the first time, he thinks of the sickly, warm spread of blood on the jut of his knuckles. He thinks of Harrington falling to the ground beneath him. He thinks of Harrington's eyes clamped shut, his mouth ajar, his breaths coming out hard and shaky and pained. He thinks of washing blood and grime from his hands last night, where the insinuation of violence still lingered on his body.

Gnawing at the raw flesh of his lip and walking further south, Billy corrects himself.

The only way anyone will notice his absence is if they were better off because of it.

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Running away isn't very expensive at all. Even if Billy doesn't have a car, bus fare for an interstate trip wouldn't cost too much. Hitchhiking is always free so long as nobody asks for anything Billy isn't willing to give. The problem, in Billy's mind, isn't leaving Hawkins. The problem comes in making sure he never has to go back. Neil would never accept him back into his home. Hell, if Billy ever crawled his sorry ass back onto Neil's doorstep after daring to run away, he'd be damn lucky if his old man didn't kill him on the spot.

If Billy really means to leave Hawkins, there's absolutely no going back.

He'll need money he doesn't have. He could save, but hell, his dad barely gives him enough money to buy a school lunch- sure, Billy could always find a job, but between school, basketball, and being Max's personal chauffeur, what time does he really have?

He could always enlist. Plenty of people do that to get out of shitty homes. But Billy can't stomach that idea for long- not after all the horror stories his old neighbor would babble at anyone who'd listen. What's the point of trading a war at home for a war in a foreign country? As far as Billy knew, joining the army would either send him home as a schizo or a vegetable. For that, he'd sooner throw

himself into a busy freeway and save himself the trouble.

The idea of staying in Hawkins long enough to raise money leaves a bitter taste in Billy's mouth, but what other choice does he have? He shoves his hands into his jacket, taking hold of the cassettes he'd hidden in his pockets earlier that morning. He remembers summers spent skipping meals so he could go to the record store and buy them. He remembers sitting by the radio for hours just to catch four glorious minutes of *Back for More*. He remembers sneaking out the house at night and to listen to cassettes with boys whose names Neil never heard of.

He remembers the night he slipped up. He remembers how badly he paid for it.

Fuck it. Running away is the only option he has now but he has to do it right. He can't survive staying here for long, but he'd sooner die than come crawling back to Hawkins with his tail between his legs. Billy can play the long game. He's done it all his life. There's just something different about the desperation in his plans now, of how badly he needs this last-ditch effort to work out in his favor. It won't be easy, but deep down, in the core of his being, Billy recognizes this for what it is: a desperate gasp for air that marks the difference between making it back to shore or drowning at sea.

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When Max sees Billy outside by the school gates, her face drops. She seems confused, like she was expecting something else- maybe because he got there by foot since the Camaro is still nowhere to be found. He recognizes the familiar flash of disdain in her expression when they catch each other's stare, but then it's replaced with something else, something much harder to name. "You didn't have to come," she tells him, a little nervously. "Mom said she was gonna pick me up."

"A thank you would've worked just fine," Billy says, the animosity in his voice unintended until it actually comes out. "Figures. I should've guessed only one of us would be walking home."

Max frowns. "If you ask her for a ride, she won't say no."

“Don’t be stupid.”

“I’m *not* being stupid. Why’d you ever come all the way out here, anyway? Your school is like four miles out, that’s like an hour on foot or somethin’.” When Billy scowls, she visibly figures it out for herself, looking a bit stunned. “You still haven’t found the car.”

“No shit. You figure that one out on your own or do you owe those sharp detective skills of yours to your hick friends?” A small part of Billy knows he shouldn’t keep pushing, not after how she swung at him last night, but goddamn if he isn’t sick of the venom he’s got rattling up inside. Goddamn it if he isn’t going to try to get it out of his system somehow. If nothing else, Max has always been good for that.

“Dial it back, asshole,” she snaps back. “I’m just trying to help.”

Billy jabs an index finger to Max’s chest. “Well, if *you* hadn’t gotten me into this shit in the first place—”

“Are you serious? I didn’t get you into this problem!” Max yelps, shoving his hand away, “ *I* never told you to barge into Will’s place like that. *I* never told you to hurt Lucas. You almost killed one of my friends!”

Billy laughs. “He lost a fight, kid, relax.”

“You kept hitting him, Billy. You knocked him out and you *kept hitting him* .” She’s fuming now. Almost emotional. “He ended up going to the hospital.”

“What do you want me to do about it, huh? It’s done. He picked a fight with the wrong person and he lost,” Billy says, furious with a swiftness, a sense of losing blood almost, that makes him want to scream. “You want me to turn back time? Stitch his face up myself? What the hell do you want, huh?”

“Can’t you even *pretend* you’re sorry?” Max asks. When Billy laughs in her face, she gets hysterical. “What’s wrong with you? You think this is funny? Shouldn’t you know what it’s like to get the crap kicked out of you?”

Max's words seem to register to them both at the same time. She couldn't more visibly regret them if she tried. Billy gives her a murderous look and, shoving two tight fists into his pockets, shoves past her. She follows him quickly, her small hands finding purchase on one of his elbows and tugging for Billy to turn around. "Get your hands off me," he says, sickly satisfied when he pulls his arm away from her, sending her stumbling back a step. "Susan's picking you up. You're not my problem and I don't wanna hear any goddamn apologies."

"I'm not apologizing. I didn't do anything wrong," Max blurts out. "My friends needed me and all you ever do is treat me like garbage, so - so, yeah, I'm gonna lie to you and I'm gonna take your stuff-"

"You took my *car*," Billy snaps back. "That's off-limits, that's always off-limits and you know that! Christ, you're thirteen, what the hell were you even thinking?"

"It was an emergency!" she says, openly defensive until she wrings her hands, struggling for the right words. "And don't expect me to apologize 'cause I'm not sorry! Not for stealing the car or yelling at you or grabbing that bat, absolutely nothing. But I... I wouldn't have taken the car if I knew your dad was gonna get like that, okay?"

Billy's eyes narrow, instantly resentful, and Max only stammers out the rest, wringing her hands. "I mean it, Billy. I swear I wouldn't have. I just didn't know."

She isn't lying. He knows it. Until last night, Max had actually never seen Neil knock Billy around, because Susan always made sure to keep Max out of the crossfire, as if the sight of Billy getting his ass beat would somehow hurt *her*. But yesterday night was different. It happened when Neil pulled Billy into the house. Max wasn't supposed to have barged into the living room, but she did and Billy had realized it before Neil had. He watched the color drain from her face, her eyes wide with horror and confusion at the sight before her. As if she were trying to decipher something completely alien. As if it hadn't been as simple as Billy curled up on the floor, his father red-faced and looming above him, and Susan running in, but not to help.

Billy knows how to deal with his step-sister's resentment, even her



hatred; but now that she knows what Neil's been up to all this time, he doesn't know what to do with her pity. Digging his nails into the flesh of his palm, Billy realized she was still stammering. "I mean, I guess I understand," she says, "but he didn't have to hit you. I've never seen him get like that. I guess I just thought-"

"I don't give a shit what you think." Making sure nobody around is paying them much mind, Billy looms over her, close enough to be intimidating if she weren't the type to meet him at his own game, fists tight and head held high. "As far as I'm concerned, we're never talking about this again. You better keep your mouth shut about last night if you know what's good for you."

Max's brows furrow. "Have you seen your face? People are gonna ask questions."

"Well, you're not gonna answer. You're not telling your friends, you're not telling your teachers, and you're definitely not telling any cops, understand?"

Max sucks her teeth, prompting Billy to grab her roughly by the shoulders. "Do you have any idea what's gonna happen if people find out about this? Keep blowing me off, Maxine. When they split us up and throw you in some ratty little foster home, don't say I didn't warn you."

"No one's gonna do that," she says, barely hiding her nervousness. "No one's taking me away from my mom. She didn't do anything."

"That's the problem, Max. When shit like this happens to a minor and you pretend you didn't see it, you get fucked over just for *knowing*. You drag a cop into this and she'll get slammed, too."

A strange look passes over Max's face. "How long has she known?"

Now it's Billy's turn to be confused. "What kinda question is that?"

"How long has she known about you and your dad?"

"Since California, I guess," Billy sniffs, flinching at how his nose stings with the motion. "She knows to stay out of my business, but that's not how cops see it. They'll say she was part of the problem. I

hate to break it to you, but I'm still a minor until next August. If the cops get involved, they'll take our parents to court and throw us in the system. Nobody's gonna think twice about you except in ways you're not gonna like."

Max breaks his gaze, crossing her arms angrily and turning her face to hide how quickly her eyes had begun to water. She has no idea, Billy realizes, that he's lying, that the reality is nobody would ever care that much about some faggot getting the shit beat out of him by his father. Even if Max told the cops, they'd get one glimpse of Billy and pat Neil on the back for fighting the good fight.

That doesn't mean Billy's in the clear though. What happens in their house *needs* to stay a secret. Ever since he was a kid, Neil warned him: if anyone ever got a whiff of what happened in their home, Billy was gonna end up wishing he were dead.

"That's your ride," Billy says suddenly, relieved to catch a glimpse of Susan's car driving up to the school parking lot. He doesn't want to apologize to Max, but if his dad gets word that he hasn't followed orders, he'll be toast. "Look, you want me to be sorry? *I'm sorry*. Dad wanted me to be responsible and-

"Save it." Max shoves ahead of him, wiping her nose with her bare wrist. "I know a lie when I hear one. Good stinkin' luck finding your car."

He watches her go. He wants to yell after her. He wants to embarrass her. For just a moment, he imagines yanking her back by the scrawny jut of her snotty wrist and tell her there's no walking away from Billy until *he* decides the conversation is through. He forces out a laugh instead, loud and biting. "You finally cut the bullshit, huh, Max? You weren't ever gonna help me. You're a dirty liar, just like the rest"

She turned back to raise her middle finger at him. "Screw you!"

"Next time you think about sticking your nose in my business, take a hint from you mom- at least she doesn't *pretend* to give a shit!"

To Billy's disappointment, Max doesn't take the bait. She keeps walking. He imagines telling her she's never once fooled him. He

imagines telling her that despite the little show she gave yesterday when she almost hit him with a bat, Max is nothing but empty talk. She'd never have what it takes to really hit him. He imagines screaming out after her: *You're a fucking coward! You think you're so much better than me? Your dad left you for some bitch half Susan's age and didn't look back. You're damaged goods! You're just as fucked as I am. Nobody wants you either!*

But then, looking so furious Billy almost wonders if he'd accidentally said all of it aloud, Max turns around. Red-faced and embarrassed. Eyes watery. "There's an old pumpkin patch out by Mr. Merrill's place," she tells him, gritting her teeth. "It's past that old pharmacy that closed down right after we moved into town. That's where we left your stupid car. Don't bother faking a thank you."

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

Thanks to everyone who read and commented last week ♥️ I hope this second chapter was worth the wait. As always, please let me know what you thought of the update and [reach out to me on tumblr](#). Ask me about what Steve is doing while Billy is out looking for his car. Tell me about why you love Billy. Let's just cry over these trash boys and be friends.

### 3. Chapter 3

That night, over dinner, Neil doesn't speak a word to his son. Even through the silence, a wary tension hangs over the house, heavy as a fog; it's tangible in the rigidity of Susan's shoulders, in the edge in Max's voice, and most obviously in Neil's feigned ignorance. He does this sometimes. Neil pretends he doesn't notice everyone walking on eggshells around him.

Billy decides it'd be in his best interest to play along. He comes out of his room only once everyone else has already finished their dinner. He serves himself their leftovers. He doesn't bother heating it up, because his father is stand by the microwave, washing dishes at the kitchen sink. So Billy treads lightly. He moves so carefully that when he places a glass of water on the dining table, he can see the ice cubes sway but can't hear them clink together. He eats with slow deliberation and tries to imagine the look on his father's face today when he came home to find the Camaro safely parked in the driveway.

In the kitchen, his father wrings the sponge. "Where exactly did you find the car?"

"A friend of mine had it," Billy lies. He keeps his tone light and unsuspecting as he speaks. "He doesn't know where I live so I guess he just thought to park it at his place."

"I saw the state you were in when you got home last night. Stumbling around the place, mumbling like some kind of drunk," Neil says. "Did this friend of yours take the car because you were too fucked up to keep it together?"

Billy bites his tongue. He can't explain what actually happened last night to his father. If Neil thinks Billy lost Max and the Camaro because he was shooting the shit with his friends, so be it. "Yes, sir."

"Had he been drinking, too?"

"No, sir."

“And what friend of yours was this?”

“His name’s Tommy,” he replies, before thinking better of it. He knows what his father will instantly assume of any guys Billy hangs out with. He clears his throat. “I asked him and his girlfriend to help me find Max last night.”

Billy’s father frowns, but it doesn’t seem dangerous. “If I ask Susan if she received an apology from you today today, am I going to be disappointed?”

“No, sir. I apologized to her after school. Max, too.”

Here’s the funny thing about his father: sometimes Neil doesn’t know what to do with all his anger, doesn’t know where to put it down when he can’t hurl it in Billy’s direction. If this was a test, Billy passed it. Neil wrings the dish-sponge in his hands and throws it into the sink with a loud splat and though he doesn’t say so, Billy knows he’s left the rest of the dishes for Billy to clean now. He watches his father leave the kitchen in subdued frustration, as if he had laid out a trap for some small animal only to find it hadn’t worked.

A wave of spiteful gratification washes over Billy. Neil hadn’t just expected him to fail, he *wanted* him to. Billy robbed him of that.

After a weekend so defined by losing control, losing his belongings, losing his ability to save face at school and at home, Billy savors the victory. He doesn’t even mind the cold food.

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The specter of violence that lingers through Billy’s house follows him to school the next day. Could he really have expected anything less? He looks like he’s gotten his ass handed to him six ways to Sunday. The moment he walks into the building, everyone at school keeps their distance. They skirt around him in the halls. They hardly spare him a glance, but in that pointed, too obvious way which means even when they’re not looking, they’re *noticing* .. Even his teachers seem more wary than concerned, ogling him only when they think he doesn’t know.

Tommy H. is the only person stupid enough to pry him for details.

Sometimes, Billy almost admires him for his seemingly inexhaustible capacity to stick his nose where it doesn't belong. It's annoying, sure, but at least he isn't pretending he hasn't noticed Billy's face looks like mincemeat. "Did something happen between you and Harrington?" he whispers, slouching in his seat. "Cause that's what everyone's saying, y'know. You look bad, but he looks *fucked up*, dude."

Billy keeps his eyes forward to where Ms. Fitchett was reading to the class. It's strange. Billy had seen Harrington's car in the parking lot this morning and he's certainly overheard a few people talking about him, but Billy hasn't caught a single glimpse of him all day. It's almost impossible to keep a low cover in their school. Hawkins High is easily the smallest school Billy has even been to; even if Harrington skipped the two classes they shared, they still always cross paths in the halls.

Not that Billy has been looking or anything. He shrugs Tommy's questions off. "Yeah, sure. He landed a few punches."

"Sheesh," Tommy says. He looks a little uneasy, like he wants to say something but ultimately thinks better of it. "Maybe getting his ass handed to him will knock 'em down a few pegs."

Billy laughs. "I don't think there's anything on the planet that's gonna lodge that stick out of his ass."

"I swear that's all Wheeler, man. You know that uppity attitude of hers? It's *contagious*. Steve wasn't like that before."

Steve this, Steve that. It's all Tommy ever talks about. Since Billy first met him, Tommy has always been so hung up about how Harrington ditched him for Wheeler. He seemed just as prissy as all the girls Steve had messed around with before going steady with her. Anyone with half a brain would probably think Harrington had been fucking him, too. "Man, do you ever keep his name out your mouth or —"

"Billy?" Ms. Fitchett asks from the front of the class. "Do you have something to share?"

"No ma'am."

“Since you’re in such a talkative mood, why don’t you tell us a little bit about the reading?”

Billy sits up straight. The other English class is reading *Catcher in the Rye*. His is reading *The Invisible Man*. If he’d just been assigned to the other English class, he wouldn’t have to be bothered with such a shitty, whiney book- besides, he’d read Salinger before. It wasn’t all that bad but he *hates* this book. Absolutely despises it. He hates it almost as much as he hates talking in class. “He’s a man. He feels invisible. That’s the novel.”

The teacher looked back at him with a disappointed frown. She’d written a few times on his graded assignments that she wished he’d demonstrate his “aptitude for literature” in class, but Billy doesn’t care. What he loses in class participation, he makes up for in essays and test scores.

“He’s so invisible he doesn’t even have a name,” some loudmouth girl interjects over the subsequent laughter.

“Yes, Chelsea! That’s a fantastic observation. I’m so glad *somebody’s* paying attention,” the teacher says. “Tommy, I want you to help us find that in the text,” she continues. “Can you read the first paragraph of the prologue for the class?”

Tommy instantly scrambles for his book. He flips through the book nervously, like he doesn’t know which page to turn to- until it becomes embarrassingly clear he really doesn’t know which page to turn to.

“The prologue’s at the start of the book, genius,” Billy says.

Tommy nods, his face reddening instantly. He waits for the class to finish laughing before he begins to recite awkwardly, reading at a glacial pace. “I am an invisible man. No, I am not a spook like those who haunted Edgar Allan Poe; I am a man of susta-substance and flesh and bone, fiber and ....and liquids- and I might even be said to process a mind-”

“Possess a mind,” Ms. Fitchett corrects.

"I might be said to possess a mind," Tommy says, his voice shaky. "I am invisible simply because people refuse to see me."

"Thank you, Tommy," the teacher grants, turning back to the chalkboard. "It's important Ellison begins his book this way. He's telling us invisibility, in all its forms, is the central concern of the novel. For our main character, this is tied to his race- but I want us to break this down in our own lives. Is this a universal experience?"

Billy scrapes his pencil into the worn-down wooden surface of his desk. Bullshit. English had always been the only class Billy found even remotely tolerable but what they're reading now is a load of garbage. It's just pages and pages of whiny, depressive bullshit. It isn't just boring, it's *irritating*- frustrating in a way Billy doesn't know how to explain. When his classmates start droning on and on about how unseen they all feel, as if they have any idea what that *really* feels like, he gets up to go to the bathroom and doesn't bother coming back to class.

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Billy *hasn't* been looking for Steve Harrington. He hasn't. It's just bizarre that they haven't crossed paths all day. Is Harrington avoiding him? Spreading rumors? Has he gone and snitched to a teacher? Whatever the case, when Billy walks into basketball practice, he notices Harrington immediately.

It turns out Tommy's description had been an understatement. All cuts and garish bruises, Harrington looks like he lost a game of chicken with a freight train. Still, he's playing like he always does, sprinting up the sideline and expertly catching a pass before whipping back around for the net. Billy tries not to stare, especially once he takes a seat beside Tommy on the bench, but his eyes keep falling back to him anyway; Harrington's lip is split, his cheek scraped red, and the pale skin of his jaw is stained purple with bruising.

If Billy's being totally honest with himself, it's difficult to look at him.

The game goes on, but Harrington shuffles off the court and takes Billy's attention with him. He watches the rise and fall of



Harrington's chest. He studies the way his shirt clings to him, how sweat drips wet on the ropes of his neck. He shouldn't be staring. He knows he shouldn't be.

It's precisely when Billy decides to stop staring at him that Harrington's eyes cut to his own.

Harrington's expression flickers, a look of shock settling into one of sheer *hatred*. It's the first time they've laid eyes on each other since the fight. Billy feels an immediate impulse to look away, but he fights against it. He glares back.

The trill of the coach's whistle couldn't have come any sooner. Harrington turns away and, throwing the basketball against the floor with real force, takes a seat a healthy distance away from Billy and Tommy both.

"Well, boys, I have good news and I have bad news," Coach Wilson begins. "The good news is I heard back from Edgewater. We've officially made it to the last tournament of the year."

The team immediately begins to holler and cheer.

"Obviously ya'll know that means we're only four games away from championships." He crosses his arms. For a coach whose team hasn't made it to championships in five years, he seems strangely pissed off. The team must notice, because Billy feels them shift into a tense, confused silence. "So, imagine my disappointment when Principle Edsall tells me six of my boys failed the semester. Have y'all guessed the bad news? There will be no championships if a third of the team is gone."

"What do you mean gone?" Tommy asks.

"As of today, six of you are suspended from the team," Wilson says. "If you can't perform in the classroom, you can't perform on the court. The rest of you can carry us to finals so long as you keep your grades up, which gives the others three months to clean up their grades. I'm talking hours spent in study hall, progress reports, tutoring, all the bells and whistles. If I don't see any improvement by next marking period, you're off the team for good."

Someone shouts over the immediate wave of complaints that erupted from the team: “We can’t make it to championships like that, coach! You’re seriously gonna make all of us pay for *their* grades?”

“A team’s a team, Mendoza. If holding each other accountable means we lose our shot at championships this year, that’s just how it is.” Coach Wilson motions towards the clipboard in his hand. “Now, if I call your name, I expect you in my office for a one-on-one discussion before the end of the day.”

One by one, Coach Wilson begins reading names. Tommy is squirming on the bench beside Billy all the while, red-faced and anxious before the coach inevitably calls Tommy out. Billy is only half-listening when Coach Wilson calls Harrington’s names after. He watches as Harrington’s face stays blank at first, before his shoulders drop and leave him looking dejected. The boys next to him must crack a joke Billy can’t hear, because Harrington immediately flips them off with any venom, offering them an embarrassed smile. There’s such a heavy exhaustion to him, Billy thinks. Something raw and defeated in the way Harrington carries himself. He doesn’t even really react to being singled out, only wearily carrying on as if to say: *this might as well happen* .

Billy is still staring at Harrington when Tommy nudges his side with the sharp jut of his elbow.

“Fuck, watch it!” he snaps before noticing Tommy motioning Billy’s attention forward. It’s only then that he realizes that Coach Wilson had been speaking, saying something that sounds strangely like Billy’s own name “*What ?*”

The coach makes a face. “What’s confusing you, son? You goin’ by a different name these days?”

“What’re you calling me for?”

“You clearly haven’t been listening,” the coach replied. “If I call your name, I expect you to meet me in my office.”

Billy’s face flushes horribly. He can feel all eyes on him now. “I thought you said this list was for people who’re suspended from the

team.”

“That’s right.”

“You can’t suspend me,” Billy replies. “I’m not failing my classes.”

“We’ll have this conversation during my office hours, Billy, not in front of the team.”

“That’s bullshit,” Billy snaps back, “I’m not going to your office. I probably have the best grades in this entire team. You can’t suspend me. I didn’t do anything wrong.”

“We will have this conversation in private or not at all,” the coach warns. “All things considered, Hargrove, you’re lucky if you’re *only* suspended from the team.”

Billy tenses. Is this about the fight with Harrington? Billy immediately looks in his direction, only to find Harrington decidedly staring down at the floor. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

Mendoza, the tall boy sitting just behind Billy who’d complained before, groans. “Man, you still don’t get it, huh? No wonder you’ve got shitty grades.”

Billy shoots him a dangerous look. “Shut up!”

“If you don’t wanna get put on blast, maybe you shouldn’t be such a moron,” he laughs.

Billy immediately jumps to his feet and the other boy does the same, springing the coach and the rest of them into tentative action. Suddenly, everything is happening at once- the coach is calling their names, warning them to cut it out. Some boys are hollering, instigating a fight. Harrington, Billy realizes, pulls Mendoza back by his shoulder, draws him close, says something Billy can’t hear.

There’s a hand on Billy’s arm now, but it’s only Tommy. “It isn’t worth it,” he says. “Just cool it, man. I get it.”

“You don’t get it,” Billy says, snapping his arm out of reach. “He can’t suspend me, it isn’t fair! I’m not *you*, okay? I know how to fucking

read.”

Tommy flinches. Billy might as well have punched him straight across the jaw. He shoves past Tommy without another word. Anger flashes inside of Billy immediately. All he sees is red. All he feels now is some weird mix of shame and regret because he didn't mean it, it wasn't that serious, but he can't take what he said back now- where else can all the anger go? Billy doesn't know where to put it down. He only knows to throw it outwards, project it, make it someone else's problem. He reaches out fast, grabbing the material of Tommy's shirt into one, tight fist, and he yanks Tommy back *hard* .

“Split it up!” Coach Wilson shouts, shoving himself between them. “Walk it off, Tommy, God knows you don't need another suspension on your record.”

Tommy fumes, but allows himself to get pulled back by one of their teammates. He throws Billy a dirty glare and Billy, for his part, only flips him off. He'll get over it. Tommy's too fucking sensitive anyways and he knows it.

Turning to Billy now, Coach Wilson takes a deep breath, but if it's supposed to calm him down, it doesn't seem to be working. “Practice is cancelled for the rest of evening, folks,” he announces to the team, sounding steady but forced. “I'm expecting everyone who got suspended from the team to meet with me tomorrow. For now, everyone but Hargrove and Harrington is free to go.”

Billy grits his teeth together. So this *is* because of Harrington after all.

As the team shuffles out of the gymnasium, Billy motions to leave, too, when the coach singles him out. “Billy Hargrove, I'm the only person standing between you and the chief of police right now,” he said. “Does the name Jim Hopper mean anything to you? Because he certainly knew your name when he stormed into my office yesterday morning. Is a private conversation still possible or would you rather I give him a call and extend him an invitation?”

Billy bites the flesh of his cheek. This isn't good. The last thing he needs is for his old man to catch wind that Billy landed himself into

trouble with the police. Fuck.

"I haven't heard an answer yet, Billy. You were plenty loud when you were acting a fool in front of the team. Is a conversation still possible?"

Billy scowls. "Yes, sir."

Satisfied enough, Coach Wilson moves onto usher the rest of the team out of the gym, chiding them for straggling behind to eavesdrop. Gradually, the gymnasium empties. Billy gave Harrington a secret glance; his entire body is frigid, his stare sharp as he glares at the floor beneath him. It feels as though they're both waiting for the other to break first; unwilling to speak, Billy only stares more openly now, no longer sure if he's doing it to antagonize Harrington or just soothe that infuriating impulse to look to him at all times.

Finally, Harrington looks up. His dark eyes met Billy's own, his stare cold as steel. The same, resentful quality in his gaze was there again from earlier, but Harrington looks different now- nervous now, confused, like he's worried about what's waiting for him when Coach Wilson comes back.

"You just couldn't keep your big mouth shut, huh, Harrington?" Billy snaps, partly so he can squeeze some answers out of Harrington and figure out what's going on. "You just had to go crying to the coach."

"Christ, you never shut up," Harrington says. "You don't know jackshit. You're just talkin' out your ass."

"Am I wrong? I bet you went running to mommy and daddy, then. *That's* why we're here. You just couldn't take losing like a man."

Harrington shoots him a look. Instead of angry, he just seems worn down and weathered. Despite himself, Billy doesn't feel any satisfaction from it. Harrington just smiles at him in a way in a way that should probably feel sarcastic, but only seems tremendously sad. He's just about to say something, too, leaning in almost imperceptibly.

"Come on in now, Steve," Coach Wilson interrupts from the opposite

end of the empty gymnasium. The door to his office is expectantly open. "I'll be speaking to you first."

Whatever tension held them tethered to each other for that single, strange moment snaps. Harrington goes. Billy watches him leave and, though he'd never admit it, nurses a bitter disappointment when Harrington never looks back.

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

I don't want to understate that Steve has all the reason in the world to hate this kid. I worry about woobifying Billy sometimes. My sympathy and love for him runs deep, so it's important to me that we never lose sight of his flaws. He says fucked up shit. He has little sympathy for the people around him. His natural impulse is to hurt people and, even when his back is up against the wall and Tommy is the only one in his corner, Billy still goes right for the jugular with him. Our poor, fucked up boy. He's got a little more bad news coming before he's saddled up with Stevie for good.

Thank you all for reading ♥☐ as always, please let me know what you think. Even the smallest response gives me life.

## 4. Chapter 4

Harrington stays in Coach Wilson's office for a long time and when he leaves, he does so quickly. He walks out without a word or so much as a spare glance in Billy's direction, who watches him hopelessly for some hint of what's to come.

Inside Wilson's office, Billy feels trapped. He keeps his white-knuckled hands over the sharp, boney flesh of his knees, digging his nails into the thin skin there. If he channels his attention into the pain, maybe he can keep himself from thinking about anything else.

He needs to calm down. He knows he does. If he's going to get his way out of this citation, he needs to settle down, but Billy can't find his center no matter how hard he tries. Maybe there's no way around this problem. Maybe he's just hollow all the way through, with no center at all.

"This'll go a lot smoother if you at least look at me, son," Coach Wilson says. "I'm not here to attack you. Believe me, the last thing I expected on a Monday morning was a visit from the town sheriff. You should've seen him. The way he walked into my office, shouting, fussin', making a scene- well, it scared me half to death. You wanna know what he said to me?"

Billy clenches his jaw. He doesn't say a word.

"The silent treatment then," the coach observes. He leans back in his chair, considering his words. "Imagine this. I come into work on Monday morning and I keep hearing talk about some fight that happened over the weekend. Mind you, kids like gossip. That don't shake me. But when *teachers* start telling tales, I listen. Now, depending on who you ask, some kid got a concussion or broken ribs or nothin' more than a bloody nose. Either way, everyone's talking about a trip to the hospital. I figure it's gossip, you know? I think it probably isn't true, but even if it is, well, that can't involve any of *my* boys."

Billy rolls his essays. "What's this got to do with me?"

"You tell me, Billy. Explain why Steve Harrington walked up to me this morning looking like he got the life beat outta him and handed me a doctor's note," Wilson says. "Looking the way you do, I don't think you'll get a lot of mileage out of playing dumb. I didn't make any mistake out there. I know you're doing fine academically. I've seen your grades. I just want to hear your side of the story. *That's* why I called you."

Billy's throat clutches up. When Max had said as much, he thought she was just being dramatic, but landing someone else in the hospital could mean his suspension. Hell, it could mean Harrington's parents might be pressing charges. Billy imagines breaking the news to his father and immediately feels nauseous at the thought.

But something's off. If he were getting arrested, a police officer would be here. If he were getting suspended, there's no way the school basketball coach would be the one breaking the news. He shrugs, feigning nonchalance. "I dunno what you're talking about. Whatever happened to Harrington's got nothing to do with me."

"Right, I'm guessing you got those bruises falling down a flight of stairs. You must've landed on those busted up knuckles of yours, is that right?" Coach Wilson gives Billy a good look, as if to coax something out of him, but he seems exhausted by whatever he sees staring back. "You're a good player, Billy. You've got the sort of raw talent most kids only dream of. But I can't keep you on the team if you're a threat to the people around you."

"A threat"? Is this some sort of joke?" Billy asks. "All because you think I was in a fight?"

"Except this isn't your first fight, Billy. It isn't your second. It isn't even your third and it's only November. You've only been in Hawkins for three months."

"You don't know that," Billy says sharply. "You can't prove jack shit."

"I know some of the boys avoid you. I know you've had it out for Steve since you got here. I know I've never seen you without some kinda bruise on you. I reckon you must be getting into trouble just



about every day and it's gonna take more than a big attitude to hide it. I didn't call your name because you're flunking, I called your name because you're raising some real red flags."

Billy's mind immediately returns to Harrington, how he seemed to linger just at the cusp of saying something to Billy before he chickened out. "So, this is about Harrington."

Wilson stares at him. "Do you genuinely not understand this is about you?"

Billy frowns. This isn't just about a fight. It can't be. This is about picking a fight with the wrong person. This is about Harrington and his rich, perfect family who probably blew a gasket the second they saw someone laid hands on their precious little boy. "Just admit it," Billy snaps. "He came running to you and told you some bullshit story and you *believed* him. That's why I'm off the team."

"Actually, Steve won't say a word about it," Coach Wilson says, folding his hands casually on the desk. "Turns out that's the reason the police chief came here in the first place. Steve didn't implicate you when he was asked about his injuries in the hospital. I suppose Hopper thought he'd change his tune if he could only get the school to pressure Steve to be honest, but he just told me, the principal, and Chief Hopper the same story. Steve says he was out of town over the weekend when he got jumped by some thugs he didn't know. Says he didn't even get a good look at the guys that got him."

Billy doesn't even realize he's holding his breath until he catches it again. *What the fuck?* Why would Harrington lie? That doesn't make any sense. There's got to be some catch. Wilson must be saying this just so Billy can incriminate himself, but before Billy can come up with some response, the coach beats him to the catch. "If you're going to lie, don't waste my time. I'm just asking for the truth. That's all. Nothing's going to happen to you. You're not getting suspended. Nobody can touch you so long as we don't have any proof. If you don't want to talk to me, that's fine. You'll be talking plenty to Miss Nessen. Are you two familiar?"

The coach isn't surprised when Billy shakes his head. "I didn't think so. She's the school counselor. I expect you to complete sixty hours in

her office come February.”

Billy stands so abruptly his chair topples over, but Wilson doesn't so much as jump. “Are you insane?” he asks. “I'm not wasting my time talking to some quack, that's not happening!”

“You're off the team then.”

“You can't do this to me,” he argues. “You can't kick me off the team over bullshit. You can't make me see some counselor. You can't make me do anything.”

“Can't I? This is my team, son. I can kick you off of it 'cause I don't like the color of your shoes,” Wilson replies, his patience running thin. “I don't owe you anything. More importantly, Billy, I'm the only thing standing between you and Chief Hopper. Do you understand that? When he came in here on Monday, he was ready to arrest you on the spot. I was the only person that vouched for you. Don't make me regret that decision. If you'd like to get the principal, the chief of police, and your parents involved in this, just say the word. Is that what you want?”

Billy clenches and unclenches his fists, feeling hot and sick and stupidly aware of the chair still toppled on the ground behind him, its legs digging into the flesh of his calf. He can't allow any of that to happen, not if he wants to leave- not if he wants to survive his father long enough to get out of Hawkins once and for all. “No, sir.”

“Then it looks like you'll be getting real familiar with Miss Nessen.” Coach Wilson shifts through a mess of paperwork before extending a few sheets to Billy. He miserably takes what's handed to him. “You're going to have her sign this form after every meeting. I'll be checking in with her about your attendance. Sixty hours, no more no less.”

“I can't...,” Billy starts, then stops, swallowing thickly. “Just because you're making me go doesn't mean I'm telling her anything.”

Coach Wilson makes a face Billy doesn't quite understand, but there's an undercurrent of pity there, clear as day. “It might do you some good to think twice about that, son. This isn't a bad thing. In fact, I'd argue it more than you deserve. You're being handed one last chance

to do things right. Plenty of kids your age aren't half as lucky." Billy bites the flesh of his cheek. He stalks towards the door when Coach Wilson continues: "If I catch wind that you're involved in another fight, I'm reporting it, Billy. And if Hopper comes knocking on my door again, I'm not standing in his way a second time. Do you understand?"

The obligatory response his father always demands from any question rises like a lump in his throat: *Yes, sir*. But Billy swallows against it and he leaves, wordless and seething.

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The afternoon hour has passed. The cool blue of the evening sky is the first thing Billy notices when he storms out of the school building, the doors swinging behind him with a weak creak. The air outside is brittle and the parking lot is nearly empty. Billy sees him immediately, every muscle in his body tensing as if on instinct.

"You waiting for me, Harrington?" Billy asks "You really shouldn't have."

Harrington, for his part, only stands upright from where he'd been leaning against his car. He crosses his arms over his chest, feigning an expression of concern: "I just wanted to get a second look at that fucked up face of yours. What happened there, huh? You look like shit."

"You're one to talk," Billy says.

"You know, I don't remember punching you that bad," he replies. "Nah, I'm sure of it. That couldn't have been me. You got a revolving door of people waiting to beat the shit outta you or something?"

He doesn't even realize how quickly he's pacing towards Harrington until they are suddenly within arm's reach of each other. Even then, his knuckles hunger for contact, his hands itching to grab the other boy by the collar of his shirt and rattle that snide look off his face. "What game are you playing, huh?" Billy asks. "What're you going around lying for? You think I owe you something now 'cause you were too chickenshit to rat me out?"

Harrington almost laughs. "Are you kidding me? I don't owe you an explanation. I don't owe you jackshit."

In that moment, Billy doesn't think of Coach Wilson. He doesn't think of Max or his father or the bruises inking indigo along the jut of his own ribs. He doesn't think at all, he only acts: in the blink of an eye, he takes a hold of the boy in front of him, ready to push and snap and break.

Harrington grabs back. He takes Billy by the shoulders of his uniform and slams him hard against the surface of his car. Billy rails against his grip, but not out of it. Harrington doesn't shift, his posture doesn't give. He's planted his feet and he's pressing Billy down and their chests are only inches apart. He's close enough for Billy to see the dry, busted line of his lips. He's close enough to smell the sweat on his skin and that only makes Billy angrier

"Stay away from me," Harrington says. Instead of breaking away, he digs his fingers into Billy's shoulder, where the flesh there is bruised and sore beneath his clothing. "And keep your hands off me if you know what's good for you."

Billy grits his teeth, wincing through the way Harrington's grip digs harder until Billy's shoulder throbs with how bad it hurts. "Stop," he hisses. "Harrington, you better stop—"

"Or what? You'll smash a plate over my head again? Break my nose? Maybe you'll actually kill me next time." Harrington releases him with a shove. "You're lucky I didn't get your ass thrown in jail."

*That's* it. That's the question gnawing at Billy's nerves and it comes spilling out his mouth with revulsion. "Why didn't you? You had your chance and you *lied* . What the fuck are you getting out of it? You one of those freaks who *likes* getting the shit beat out of them?" When Billy's taunting doesn't beget a response, he continues: "You're all talk, Harrington. You didn't snitch on me 'cause you're afraid. I handed your ass to you once and you know I'd do it again. You're just too bitch to do anything about it."

The punch comes fast, but it doesn't land. Harrington hits the frame of his car instead, his fist landing just beside Billy's temple. He gives

Billy that look again, the one he gave in the gymnasium earlier today: sharp and hateful and meandering, as if the atrocious, secret things Billy knows about himself lay glaringly apparent to him. When he speaks, his voice is worn thin. "You really don't know how to stop, huh?"

Billy's breath catches, dying in his throat. A bizarre disappointment settles in his gut and he stands upright, shoving his way out of Harrington's space. He imagines turning around and dealing a blow. He imagines Harrington thrown off his feet and onto the gravel beneath them.

Then he remembers himself. Another fight will cost him everything, even his chance to get out of town. For the second time that day, Billy chooses against the instinctual urge to keep pressing, to tear everything apart with bare hands or cruel words. He leaves. He stalks away from Harrington and doesn't look back.

Only once Billy is seated in his Camaro does he allow himself a backwards glance. In the rear-view mirror, Harrington's car still stands there in the distance. Billy's foot falters over the gas pedal before he floors it, trying to force some distance between his body and the trouble he's in.

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It shouldn't be this hard to disengage.

Like debris after a fire, the anger that's been burning inside Billy all day settles down, but lingers over him all the same. He senses it, this strange feeling without name. It's there in the back of his mind, in the aching of his shoulder, right where Harrington had laid his hands on him.

When he comes home, the lights are on but all the doors are closed. A while goes by before Billy realizes that the sound of conversation coming from somewhere deeper in the house is rooted in Max's room. It takes longer still for him to recognize the occasional, but unmistakable voice of his father, occasionally interjecting over the heated back-and-forth between Susan and Max. Billy can't make much of it out, but Max's voice is loud and clear and emotional: *I don't want to*, Billy hears her say. *Why is that so hard to understand?*

He listens, but without any real intent. His interest really only goes so far. It's a strange thing, he thinks, to sit at the outskirts of an argument for a change, to know there is conflict in his house but not find himself at the core of it.

Since Neil brought the Mayfields into his life, Max has always been the golden child. The set-up is simple: Billy can't do anything right and Max can do no wrong. Among all of Billy's resentments, the pedestal Max sits in has always been chief among them. But now their parents are locked in a room with her, Susan's voice pleading and shrill, his father's just bordering on scolding. Billy thought he'd relish the day Max found herself in problem but instead it's just *strange* .

Billy goes entirely unnoticed. Billy eats, bathes, and climbs into bed. The night stretches until the argument between Max, Susan, and his father runs its course: voices wane and die away, doors open, and a pair of footsteps sound creakily across hardwood floors.

Still, sleep doesn't come.

Billy turns where he lays. He thinks of shoving Steve Harrington and getting shoved back. He thinks of aching and hating and the words they exchanged as they stood over the possibility of violence. Without quite intending to, Billy's hand finds its way to his bruised shoulder. He touches himself gingerly there, as if the skin of his shoulder has changed somehow just because it's been touched by someone else.

There's something happening here and Billy knows it, but it's too dangerous to confront. That's the trouble with being alone to his thoughts in the dark: it's so much harder to ignore shame when you've got nothing to distract you from it.

Billy digs his nails into his shoulder, pain bursting like a firecracker and, if only for a moment, it ushers his thoughts away.

## 5. Chapter 5

Max's newfound role as the family scapegoat loses its novelty by morning, when Billy finds himself standing uselessly in the hallway for another argument to end. He glances at the time for the third time, already aware that they're inevitably going to be late for class today. This will mean a phone call home by the school. Billy really can't afford it. Any interaction between school faculty and his father risks broaching the subject of the fight or Billy's suspension from the basketball team.

From down the hallway, Susan's voice is pleading, even a little pathetic. "Sweetie, we're just asking that you give this a chance. Isn't it fun to try something new for a chance?"

"Mom, I'm going to look stupid," Max replies. "I can't go to school like this!"

Billy recognizes the sounds of his father's voice, a low and unintelligible mumble. Whatever he says must be upsetting, because when Max replies, she sounds like she's going to cry. "But I never ever asked you to do that," she says. "I didn't ask for any of this. If it's about the money, can't you just return the clothes?"

"You're not being very fair," Susan says. "How is this reaction supposed to make us feel?"

"Do you even care how wearing this is gonna make *me* feel?"

"That's enough," Susan snaps. She's trying to be firm, but Billy can tell she's too embarrassed to keep herself from just sounding pathetic. "You're wearing the clothes I laid out for you and that's final. This is no way for a girl your age to behave."

Max is all but shouting now, except whatever she tries to say now is interrupted by bursts of what sounds like sobbing. Billy can only just make out the dull mumbling of his father's voice again, interrupted by Max's continued whining. It isn't working. She doesn't care. Billy fumes, pacing down the hallway, itching to run out the door. This isn't how things are supposed to work in this house. They're not

supposed to tolerate yelling. They're not supposed to allow her to cry. *Respect and responsibility*, he wants to remind them. *Where's the respect in her throwing a tantrum?*

He bolts. The front door slams behind him.

It's quieter in his car. This isn't the first time Billy has jumped into the Camaro to avoid his family's bullshit and it won't be the last. It helps to be here. Billy can actually breathe here, better than he can at home. Besides, he's running on empty- he hardly slept last night, tossing and turning and unable to quiet his thoughts. When he'd woken up, it felt as though reality had finally set in. He'd been suspended from the team. The police were keeping an eye on him and he had at least one officer on his back, desperate to arrest him. Harrington almost settled over him like a weight on his chest: he had been suspended from the team. Today marks the start of three months of extra drills. Even worse than that, today marks the first day of having to walk into a counselor's office. Billy doesn't know how he'll stomach the humiliation.

He won't speak to any counselor. He can't. He won't make that mistake again.

He was hardly eight years old when he'd fucked up. His mom was gone by then, but those were the early days- maybe only two or three weeks after he lost her. He'd been such an idiot back then, thoughtless the way kids usually are and stupidly unaware that he couldn't be like that at all; Billy can't even remember why he did it, but he figures he liked the teacher too much. She was friendly. Blonde, like his mom was, but older. She seemed to like him well enough so maybe that's why Billy thought he was safe to ask dumb questions. He asked her about families. He asked if parents could stop loving each other. He just wanted to know whether or not he'd make it alright without his mother and the more questions he asked, the more the teacher just stared at him, her voice progressively softer and softer as she stopped answering Billy's questions and raised a few of her own instead.

When Billy got home from school that day, his father had been waiting. Under his stare, Billy reluctantly stepped through the threshold of the front door. Those were the early days. He wasn't yet



used to being under his father's total control. Neil yanked Billy by the shoulders so hard his feet almost came off the floor completely. *You keep your mouth shut, Billy*, he said, jabbing his finger hard into Billy's chest. *I'll be damned if someone starts sticking their nose in my business because you've been running your mouth*. His breath reeked of alcohol. *What happens in this house stays in this house, you understand?*

It wouldn't be the last time Billy brought unwanted attention into the home, but it would be the first and only time Neil would let him off the hook for it. These days, Neil isn't very interested in using words. He won't make the same mistake again.

When the door at the passenger's side of the car swings open, Billy jumps. Max doesn't announce herself. She takes her seat and when she slams the door close, the car jolts at the impact. "Jesus fucking Christ!" Billy snaps. "Haven't you done enough? Watch the door!"

Max doesn't apologize. She doesn't even respond. She just keeps head down, her auburn hair curtaining around her face, as if she doesn't want Billy to get a good look at her. It's the sounds that give her away. She's still sniffing and she's breathing carefully, like she's trying not to sob.

Billy stares at her. "What the hell are you wearing?"

"A dress *obviously* ." She wipes her nose with the back of her hand. Her legs are drawn up so that her feet are nearly on the dashboard, plum stockings beneath a chestnut-colored skirt. "Why, you wanna borrow it?"

"Bitch." Billy reaches over for the glove compartment and she tenses where she sits before she realizes he's only reaching over for a pack of gum. He pops a stick of it in his mouth, makes a show of chewing it. "You look like a clown."

"You would know, wouldn't you?"

"Keep that shit up and you're *walking* to school," he barks back. "I didn't do anything to you, did I? I'm not Susan. Don't take your shit out on me."

“Apparently, your dad thinks I need to start dressing like a girl. He said I ‘give people the wrong idea’.” A breath shudders out of her like a sob. “And my mom- my mom *agreed with him* . They bought me all these clothes. You should’ve seen it. Mom actually thought I was gonna be excited about this. Now I gotta go to school looking like *this* - I hate this! This is the worst day of my life.”

“Christ, do you hear yourself? You throw a skirt on *once* . Big fucking deal.”

“Screw you,” Max says. “You go around half-naked all the time and no one says anything to you.”

Billy laughs, a raw and biting sound. “You think my dad hasn’t thrown that shit at me? Get a grip. Whatever you’re going through, I’ve already been there- except when he’s going on about how much of a faggot he thinks I am, he isn’t just using his words.”

Max goes very still, her shoulders tensing immediately, but Billy can’t tell if it’s because they’re nearing her school or because this is only the second time they’ve acknowledged what Neil does to him.

“This is because of your dad. He’s the one doing this. My mom never used to complain about how I dress or how I talk or how I act. Nobody hits me, but they said I looked like a —” Max’s voice cracks, her watery eyes anchored to her lap.

Billy frowns. “You gotta calm down, kid. You walk into school crying like that and they’re gonna send you right back home.”

“I’m trying,” Max says, wiping her eyes. “It’s just hard. He just calls us all this crazy stuff and Mom doesn’t even care that it’s all a big, awful lie.”

Billy doesn’t respond to her. They just sit in silence and watch other kids march along into the school. Billy considers telling her to leave, but it’s harder to dismiss her than it should be. He just feels angry- not on her behalf, nothing as selfless as that. He’s just angry. He’s just full of this deep, seething anger that’s got nowhere to go. Max has no idea what she’s talking about, but he can’t tell her the truth. He doesn’t know how to act or what to say to her that won’t reveal

something secret. *We're not the same*, he imagines telling her. He can almost hear the bite in his voice as he'd say it. *He sees right through me. He can tell. He might be wrong about you, but he's always been right about me.*

Max doesn't leave the Camaro until the school bell sounds, signaling the start of first period. By then, she's calmed down enough that her breathing's steadied, but her eyes are puffy and pink. When she says something, it's mumbled. Billy can't make it out and he doesn't really care enough to know. He just watches her leave, walking tensely in clothes that just look *wrong* on her.

He's only half-mindful of the ache in his jaw from chewing too hard, and if he stays there too long in the quiet oppressiveness of his car, well - he's already late to school anyways.

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Billy figures that if he sneaks into the counselor's office during lunch period, there might be less of a chance anyone he knows will be around to catch him doing it. There aren't any classrooms on the fifth floor of the school besides faculty office rooms. Billy should be in the clear, but he walks quickly anyway and pulls up his hoodie. It doesn't hurt to be careful.

The door to Ms. Nessen's office is labeled "School Counselor." Of course it is. Billy practically cringes when he knocks on the door. He prays no answer will come, but there's the immediate sound of movement and the hum of a radio playing inside is turned down.

He doesn't know what exactly he was expecting, but when Billy is invited inside, he's surprised by the person sitting there. The first thing Billy notices is her smile- that amicable, brilliant sort of thing one might see in films, but rarely in person. She's all polish and symmetry, dark eyed with a halo of curls in purposeful chaos. "How can I help you?"

Billy shifts where he stands. "Coach Wilson told me to look for a Ms. Nessen."

"You must be Billy," she says, motioning towards the chair. "I'm Diana, it's nice to meet you. Please, take a seat. Get comfortable."

Billy takes a seat. It's comfortable, a little plush, but it isn't a fainting couch. Again, Billy wasn't expecting anything specific but- well, he figured things would be different. Unfolding the paperwork Coach Wilson had given him, Billy throws it on her desk. "Look, I'm gonna be honest, I don't want to be here. I got suspended from the basketball team. The coach told me I gotta meet with you a couple of times before he'll throw me back on the court. I'm not here to get all personal."

"So you're not here for counseling?" she asks. "I understand this might feel strange. A lot of people don't feel comfortable talking to a stranger, but-"

"I mean it," Billy interrupted. "I'm just here because the coach is kicking me off the team otherwise." Then, with a sweeping gesture at his face, he adds: "I got into a few fights."

Her eyebrows arch when she reads through the forms. "That's certainly quite a lot of hours. I suspect we'll be getting to know each other pretty well." When he doesn't respond, she places the paper down between them. "Being on the team must mean a lot to you. I'm sorry you almost got that taken away."

"It's just an easy way to waste time," Billy says with a shrug, "I don't really give a shit."

"Sure, but extracurriculars look great on a resume. You shouldn't let that go. You might even qualify for a few college scholarships if you stay on the team. Isn't that worthwhile?"

Billy rolls his eyes. "Look, I'm not really thinking that far ahead. All I care about is getting out of this town. If I finish high school, big whoop."

"Where are you headed?" she asks, not sounding at all perturbed.

"California."

"Where in California?"

"You planning a visit or something?"

"Maybe I am," Diana says with some humor. It's a matter of time, Billy thinks. She'll drop the pleasant act so long as he pushes back hard enough. "You transferred here, didn't you? Is that where you're from?"

When Billy only gives her a shrug, she offers him a sympathetic look. "I understand it can be uncomfortable to talk about yourself, Billy. But if we're going to be doing this, we're going to have to give it a try. Just tell me a little about yourself." When he doesn't respond, she continues. "I could give it a start, if you'd like. I'm Diana. I grew up in Memphis. I'm thirty-two, I went to ISU, and-

"How about you just ask me about the fights," Billy snaps. "That's why I'm here, isn't it? You spoke to Coach Wilson, you already know I'm a 'threat to the school' or whatever. Aren't you supposed to ask me questions about that?"

"I'd like to get to know about you in your own words."

Billy sucks his teeth.

"Do you want to talk to me about the fights? You can't be very comfortable. When did it happen?" A minute passes before Diana tries again, her voice softer than before. "Can I know who was involved? Was it someone from the school?"

Silence still.

"You know, Billy, what you say in this room, stays in this room."

"That's bullshit," Billy replies. "You're mandated to call the cops on me, aren't you? If I say the wrong thing, nothing stays in this room."

She's visibly surprised by this. "I am a mandated reporter, yes. Do you foresee that being an issue?"

Billy can't say anything to that. This time, the silence stretches between them for so long that the quiet runs loud. He can hear the ticking of the little clock on her desk, the early notes of whatever next song is playing now. It's a silence that begs to be broken, but Billy refuses to do it. Even if all that quiet just ... gets unnerving after

a while. It sort of bites at him, itches on the surface of his skin.

“If there's a legitimate reason to believe that you're in danger or pose a danger to someone else, I have to contact the authorities, but I don't want to do that if it's not necessary. There's a code of ethics you have to agree to when you do this line of work. It includes confidentiality,” she explains. “If that's going to worry you, how about we lay some ground rules? We can talk about anything you want. If we touch a subject you don't want to address, pump the breaks. Think of it like a car. You're holding the steering wheel. You've got your foot on the gas and I'm just sitting passenger.”

“I give the word and you'll stop?” Billy says, incredulity practically dripping from his tone. “Just like that? No questions?”

“No questions. The second we cross a boundary, say the word and I'll drop it. We won't go anywhere you don't want to go. What do you say?”

Billy shrugs. “Whatever.”

“I'm going to need a little more than that, Billy. Do you feel absolutely comfortable with what I said?”

“Christ, yes! Is that what you want to hear? Yes .” Billy unclenches his hands, which have by now instinctually curled tight. “Is this what it's gonna be like? You asking me stupid questions and playing nice for what, three fucking months?”

“What makes you think I'm playing nice?”

“Because that's what you do, isn't it? You sit here and you pretend to give a shit about every loser that comes in with a sob story. You ask your shrink questions and you feed everybody the same spiel about how unique and special they are. It's bullshit.”

“Do you find it hard to believe I might genuinely want to hear what you have to say?”

Billy bites the wall of his cheek, that same, sore spot that's been hurting since yesterday. It's a burst of pain, grounding and harrowing. “Nobody gives a shit. Not really. Not unless they can get

something out of it and for you, it's a check. This is just your job. I'm not stupid enough to forget it."

"This is my job, that's certainly true, but that doesn't mean I don't care about what I'm doing or the people I speak to." Diana considers her words. "Do you know what I find interesting? Sometimes our world views show up in the way we talk. Like when you say, 'nobody gives a shit unless they get something out of it.' I can't help but think something or someone in your life has convinced you of that. If you want me to be honest, I think you're testing to see if the same rules that apply out there, in your everyday life, apply in here. But they don't, Billy. There's a lot to be gained here, if you want it. You always have the option of not showing up, but I suppose that all boils down to how much you're willing to lose."

Billy doesn't respond. He sits forward just enough to tap the small clock on her desk instead, giving it a tap. "We've only got like ten minutes left, right?"

She glances at the time. "Looks like it."

"Then this is where I draw the line. I don't wanna talk anymore today."

"Of course. I understand." She's looking at him, but not in the way that Max did after he tried to pick her up from school two days ago, not in the way his elementary school teacher did before she called his father. There's no pity there. Mostly, she looks unnerved, maybe disappointed, but not at all discouraged. And that registers, however strangely, like Billy has lost some game he didn't mean to be playing. She signs Billy's forms, her signature a messy loop of blue ink on the white of the paper. "Am I going to see you again tomorrow?"

Billy takes it from her a little too quickly, almost snatching. He can't think of any other reason she would ask that question unless she wants the satisfaction of having made him say it. It's the sort of thing his father warned him about people like these and the careful, conniving ways they do things. He should say yes, but he crosses his arms instead, reclining where he sits, his eyes firmly set on the clock. The last ten minutes of their session is spent in silence.

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Maybe it was a mistake to skip lunch period. Practise is always tiring, but the added hours of drills wipe Billy out. He and Tommy are playing one-on-one, just as Coach Wilson asked of all the boys who'd gotten suspended off the team, but it's a struggle. His energy has plummeted. His game is weak. Tommy has never been the worst player on the team by any means, but he's certainly never been good enough to get the upper-hand on Billy until now.

He should've eaten something.

Coach Wilson is shouting at the boys, trying to get their spirits up. Across the court, Mendoza is playing against Harrington, but his offense is nonexistent. There's practically enough space between them both to fit a third person and when Steve steals the ball from him, Mendoza hardly resists. He chases him across the court, but draws short at too far a distance. Harrington makes a clean half-court shot, which would be impressive if Mendoza hadn't all but handed him the ball.

Coach Wilson blows the whistle. "Mendoza, you're playing against him! *Against him* ! What the hell are you doing, boy?"

Every member of the basketball team stops playing, following the coach's instructions, shuffles partners for a third time. Today's drills are supposed to consist of simple one-on-one games. The problem here is that nobody wants to play with Harrington. Every time he has to change partners, each new partner is just as wary as the last.

Billy tries not to focus on it. He dribbles the ball, wrenching his focus away from the boy across the court and the rumbling in his stomach. The kid against him now is some guy named Korrick, lanky and thin as bones but quick on his feet. He's tall, so his strides are much wider than Billy's own. Their game together consists almost entirely of running, of ducking out from each other's reach when the other steals the ball. The chance to make a shot opens after a short while and Billy is ready to make the throw, the ball just about ready to slip out of his hand when -

The coach's whistle. Again.

All the boys groan now, muttering to themselves as basketballs drop



and sneakers skid to a halt against the polished floor. Billy watches as Coach Wilson approaches Harrington now, who angrily throws the ball hard against the floor, sending it bouncing up high. "It's just one of those days, Steve," he says, not unkindly. "What're we gonna do with you?"

"I'm not the problem," Steve says. "Everyone you throw me at keeps acting like— like I'm *made of glass* or something. If I'm here, I'm good to play. I'm not gonna burst a blood vessel if someone takes the ball from me."

"Maybe if he didn't look like beat to all hell, that wouldn't be a problem," Tommy says to Billy now, suddenly beside him. The two watch, just as the rest of the boys do, as Harrington and the coach exchange a few words. With a blow of the whistle, Wilson instructs everyone to find new partners, but his eyes fall squarely to Billy, like there's something he's got to say. It takes Billy back a little, a sort of wary confusion written all over his face until he realizes who else is looking at him: Harrington.

When the coach gestures for him to come closer, Billy follows. "Can I ask you twp to play a clean game together or is this going to be a problem?" he asks them, already a little unconvinced.

Crossing his arms, Harrington says, "It doesn't have to be a problem, but that's not entirely up to me, is it?"

*Christ*, Billy thinks, *I'm not a fuckin' animal*. He shrugs, shaking his head as if what they're suggesting is the most absurd thing he's ever heard. "I don't see a problem so long as you play a decent game."

Harrington doesn't glare exactly, but the look he gives Billy could curdle milk. When the coach blows the whistle, everyone on the court goes back into play, and the two of them are no different. This could end badly, Billy knows, and the last thing he needs is another altercation with the person that landed him in this mess to begin with. Still, if Billy's going to play this game, he'll play it well- if only out of spite.

They take up their positions on opposite sides of the court. Billy's fingers slot into the ball's familiar grooves and he dribbles it once,

twice, three times against the floor. Their eyes are on each other now- it's a tense, uninterrupted stare to see who moves first. It's the first time they've looked at each other this long since that night at the Byer's house.

Billy jolts to the left and Harrington follows. Contact is tense, but there's none of the usual elbowing and shit-talk like all the games between them before this one. Billy damn well doesn't treat Harrington like glass, but something sort of clicks into place now. All of Billy's sluggishness and exhaustion is gone. His heart spurs into a wild frenzy instead, absolutely wired.

Billy swerves, tries to keep out of Harrington's grip, but Harrington's hand makes contact- he steals the basketball from him and goes running in the opposite direction. Billy jolts to catch up, just about smacks the ball out of Harrington's hand on the uptake of a dribble, but he slips away.

His first shot goes up and in with a clean swish of the net.

Something is different about both of them now. Billy's eyes are glued to Harrington now, but not because of the bad blood between them. All that matters is snatching the ball back out of his hands.

Distantly, because he can't quite divide his attention enough to chase this thought too far, Billy has the vague sense that this is what he started playing basketball for. The escape, the chase, the bite of an actual challenge. He'd never admit it, but Harrington is the only person on the team who ever seems to light that spark for Billy when he plays.

Between the two of them, shots are made and lost, but the pace doesn't let up. Harrington's breathing is harsh and heavy as he moves just behind Billy, ready to block the throw he's determined to land. It's hot. It's oppressively hot in the room now, after all this work, but Billy can't stop, can't rest no matter how much he'd like to.

He throws Harrington off with a quick, roundabout maneuver instead and then he aims... jumps...

Billy winces when the ball clangs off the rim.

The whistle goes off just then, ushering the game to a close. “Now *that’s* what I’m talking about!” Coach Wilson says in their direction, clapping grandly. “That’s the sort of hustle I’m asking for!”

He doesn’t turn to look at him, but Billy can hear Harrington walking up beside him. The other boy doubles-over, bracing himself by planting his hands on his knees, and sucking in air by the lungfuls. Billy can’t see his face, not with that dark mess of his hair spilling over it now, but he watches the rise and fall of his back with each pant. He stares at the curve of his spine. He’s wearing white today and the material of his shirt comes up damp with sweat, the lightest suggestion of the color of his skin beneath.

Harrington wipes his mouth. Billy means to look away, but a flash of red catches his eye in the worst possible way- there’s a smudge of blood on Harrington’s hand. His mouth is wet and bright red where the split on his lower lip must’ve just re-opened. *He’s bleeding* . Billy takes an instinctual step backward, shooting a quick glance to the coach who’s distracted looking elsewhere. Billy didn’t hit him- he knows he didn’t. In an instant, he tries to think back on when he did this, if he’d elbowed him, shoved him, anything. Fuck, he couldn’t have played with Harrington, he’s fucked—

Harrington shakes his head, as if reading his thoughts. “You didn’t do anything,” he says, a little breathlessly. “I must’ve bit it while we were playing. I keep forgetting it’s cut. This is like the third time it started bleeding today. Eating’s been a damn nightmare.”

Thoughtlessly, Billy nods. He wants to tell him that he only cares so much as Coach Wilson knows he wasn’t the one responsible, but the lie dies in his throat.

The coach signals the boys to pack up and leave. They’re done with drills for today. Everyone slowly makes for the locker room, but Billy deliberately lingers, treading slowly so that the space between Harrington and himself grows and grows. He doesn’t quite know why he says it. He doesn’t care. He’ll be damned if Harrington thinks he’s sorry. But, the words come out of him anyway: “Baking soda.”

His voice comes out so breathless, so low, that Billy hopes Harrington hasn’t heard him. But the other boy turns to look at him, brows

furled as he waits for an explanation. “Grab some baking soda, mix it with water. It makes a paste.” Billy explains, before uselessly tacking on: “Put that on your busted lip.”

“Got a lot of experience with this sorta shit, huh?”

Billy bites down the immediate urge to tell him to go fuck himself. “It helps,” he says instead, a little resentful.

Harrington doesn’t reply. He just frowns, confusion giving way to the sort of distrustful look one extends to something inappropriate or to someone insane. He turns away and paces into the locker-room faster than before, without so much as another sound.

Billy turns to take the other exit out, pushing through the doors that lead him to the winter air waiting outside of the school-building. It’s not that Billy expected a ‘thank you’ exactly. He didn’t do it for that. But, by the time he turns his car on, the radio blasting on high, Billy realizes he doesn’t have a good excuse for offering Harrington any advice. The drive to Max’s AV Club is a quick one, but Billy spends the all of it replaying everything that happened on the court over and over again in his head.

Hours pass before Billy realizes he was just checking to see if he let slip any sort of tell.

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

In my experience, abusive step-parents may have certain lines with children that "aren't theirs." I don't think I see Neil every raising a hand at Max, but I do think he's an emotionally abusive bigot. He's all about control and shame, so it made sense to me that he'd be the sort of man to uphold these strict gender expectations on both of the kids in his life. I feel there's this myth that girls can do everything boys can do without worry- here's to all the girls who had to deal with some bullshit for being "tomboys" and the like. It's a heavy plight.

This chapter introduces Billy's counselor. I know

most of us don't read fanfiction for original characters, so please be patient with me: she and Coach Wilson are the only two character I'm taking creative license with and I promise this story won't focus more on them than is absolutely necessary. I hope you enjoy them as much as I do.

## 6. Chapter 6

### Notes for the Chapter:

Word of Warning: another doozy in the Hargrove household.

On Friday morning, Billy walks out the door and wonders if he should be more concerned that it hardly seems to matter when he does. They're arguing inside. It is still tremendously early, the Indiana sky dark blue and crisp with the metallic taste of winter, and it is strange, Billy thinks, that the chaos inside his house never quite reaches the outside world. A beating, a night spent squirming beneath his father's dangerous attention, and an entire week's worth of morning arguments, but the world carries on. Silent. Still. Unaffected.

What a way to feel small.

Last he saw, Susan was pleading with Max through the bathroom door she locked between them. His father was still in his room, probably getting dressed for work. Billy could leave now, he thinks, without Maxine, without a word, and without so much as a backwards glance.

He doesn't do that.

Between classes, practice, and an extra hour of drills, the school day runs longer now and it shows. Billy knows he can't keep giving such a weak game on the court. He can't come home so plainly hungry. Yesterday night, his father slammed his fist on the dining room table. His plate and his family jolted upright with the spontaneity of it. "Did you forget how to eat at a table?" he asked Billy. "Shoveling food down your throat like that- you're being rude. If you want to act as though you're going hungry, you can go to your room without dinner. *Slow down*."

Billy frowns. His stomach had churned itself into knots over that, nervousness intertwining itself with embarrassment until it all formed a big, awful aching. His father's questions have always been

dangerous things, but Billy feels the risk especially now. He has so much to hide and so much to lose. Billy wants to leave, but he's hungry now. There's no use denying it, he has to go back inside. So, he draws a breath. He breathes it out slow, he watches the white fog of it dissipate into the air.

Billy figures he'll leave just as soon as he finishes breakfast, but when he walks into the kitchen and finds his parents nearby, he halts. They're sitting at the dining room table. His father doesn't look up when Billy walks past them to head into the kitchen, but Susan does- her stare is tense, a little wary of Billy, as if whatever she was about to say has been halted by the sight of him.

If they think they're being quiet, they're not.

"You're too soft on her," Billy hears his father explain. His voice is calm but not without its edge. "That's the problem. She's going to do this to you every single day if you don't put your foot down."

"We both knew that she was going to be a little resistant at first -"

"It's been a week."

"Well, maybe- could it be that maybe this was a bad idea?" she asks, before nervously continuing. "Yes, she's getting older now and I know you're right- I *know* she's got to grow out of this phase, but maybe forcing her out of it is going to have the opposite effect."

In the kitchen, Billy makes as much noise as he reasonably can so that they don't think he's listening in. He opens the fridge. He takes out the milk. He serves himself cereal, but the sound of conversation still carries. "Please don't look at me like that," he hears Susan say. "I just- I don't want her to see me as the enemy, alright? I can't have that."

Despite himself, Billy wonders if her voice has always shaken this much, if it's always sounded this nervous and thinned or if that's only the culmination of all she now knows. His father is her complete opposite, his voice sure and smug when he replies. "It doesn't have to get there, but this sorta thing has to be nipped from the bud," he says. "Believe me, Susan, I've been down this road before."

Billy chews. He swallows. He hardly tastes the food in his mouth now, too preoccupied with how moronic his father sounds. As if he's some sort of expert child-rearer, as if his definition of good parenting doesn't consist of stopping just short of landing Billy in the hospital.

"I just- I raised her right, Neal. I don't think she's actually one of *those* sort of girls."

Neil laughs at her, a snide bark of a sound. "You raised her right? So, what, you think all this pansy shit with Billy is just a case of bad parenting?"

Billy's face flashes hot. Neil knows he can hear him, he's saying this for the sheer pleasure of being heard. It's apparent in the condescension that practically drips in his voice, the way he almost announces it as if saying that sort of shit is some hilarious joke. It takes everything he has not to smash the bowl in his hands to the floor.

"Maybe you're right," Neil continues. "He's been like that since he was boy. I saw it in him from the start, but his mother didn't wanna rectify it. She had no sense of discipline; she babied him, let him play with her clothes, let him grow his hair long as any girl's. She made it worse, understand, because she catered to it- same as you do. But it's not too late for Maxine."

Billy knows he shouldn't stay. He knows his father wants to get a rise out of him, he knows it'd be wiser to duck his head, and leave while he still can. Leaving the house is the only sure-fire way to make sure he doesn't end up lunging at his father where he stands. He's seeing red. He's practically sick with it. Neil shouldn't be allowed to say just those things. There are things he has no right to share, things Susan has no right to know. He shouldn't be allowed to just talk about his mother like that when it's *his* fault. *It's his fault she's gone*. He wants to leave, he wants to scream, he wants to punch the mere mention of his mother out of his father's filthy mouth.

Just as he's about to make it out the house through the kitchen, his father's voice stops him: " Finally tired of eavesdropping, are you? Where the hell do you think you're going without Maxine?"



"I'm waiting for her in the car," Billy answers, voice taut as he calls back out from the kitchen. Susan mumbles something, voice nervous, a small plea for Neil to just let it go, but she's wasting her breath. Neil calls him to the dining room. Trying to force the visible irritation from his face, Billy goes.

"If I ask you a question, you damn well better respond to me to my face," Neil says. Billy ducks his head, his patience unraveling thread by thread. "Try that again."

"I *said* I'm going to wait for her in the car," Billy repeats, but his tone is sharp. First mistake.

"So, you think you can just pick up and leave, like what's happening with Maxine doesn't concern you?" he asks.

"I—" Billy frowns, considering his words, and shakes his head. The problem is it doesn't end there. He doesn't keep quiet. Second mistake. "There's nothing *happening* with Max," he says to them. "She's not trying to be a boy, okay? Just because she's not out there acting like some dyke, you guys are just making it about that."

Susan immediately tenses at Billy's words. She shifts where she sits, poorly cloaking the offense she's taken to that, but her hand is still holding Neil's own over the table. When Susan keeps quiet, Neil speaks again and there's a quality to how he speaks that reminds Billy of placing bait in a trap. "So, this little show she's putting on has nothing to do with the example you've set?"

Before he can think better of it, Billy blurts out: "Right, 'cause *I'm* the one who needs to teach her how to dress like a girl."

"Well, you'd certainly be the one to know, wouldn't you?"

"Man, screw you," Billy spits back. He realizes he's fucked up as the words are still coming out of his mouth, but it's too late. That's one mistake too many. Neil's chair skids back when he rises, nostrils flared, fist tight at his side. Billy's eyes go round and he takes an instinctual step backward but the dining room wall crowds behind him, keeps him from all but rushing out the room. "I'm sorry," he

blurts out, sounding a little hysteric. “Dad, I didn’t mean to, I just- I’m sorry-”

His father doesn’t respond. He just shakes his head, stalking forward, taking another colossal step towards his son when suddenly he halts. Susan’s hand clasps around his arm and it stills him, like he’s been dealt a strike. It’s the first time, the only time, she’s ever done anything but fall back. “Please, Neil,” she whispers. “Not with Max is in the house. Please, not again. Max is *here* .”

It doesn’t work. Billy doesn’t know why Neil snapping his arm out of her grip surprises him, why he tries to take another blind step backwards when the wall is already solid against his spine. In the blink of an eye, his father crowds him, his right hand sets in warning against Billy’s throat.

“Say it again,” he intones, “To my face this time. Say it again.”

Pain etched across his face, Billy shakes his head. His father repeats himself, but Billy resigns, wilts, shakes his head once more and makes a sound more primal than human. *Weak* , he thinks, even to his own ears. *Pathetic* .

“Next time you have something smart to say, commit to it,” Neil tells him, almost a growl. “And you best be prepared for the consequences, you understand?”

When Billy tries to respond, Neil smacks his palm flat against the wall just above Billy’s head, watching him as he flinches. “You’re going to get your sister out of that bathroom,” he continues. “You’re going to get out of my face and out my house and you’re going to drive your sister to school in the car that I gave you before I think better of letting you step out of this house in one piece at all.”

Billy doesn’t respond. Maybe he should. But his stomach ties itself into knots and his throat burns and he’s afraid that if he speaks now, he won’t be able to stop himself from screaming. His father lets him go, hand slipping from the fluttering, nervous mess that is Billy’s neck and he immediately slips away.

He’s angry, unbearably angry, and the food in his stomach feels like a

mistake fated to come spilling back out of him if he doesn't calm down. There's a part of Billy that blames himself. His father was trying to get a rise out of him. He couldn't have been more obvious if he tried and Billy *fell for it*. He should've been smarter than that. He should've known how to disengage, how to walk away, how to gain the upperhand by showing Neil how ineffective his words were but between what Neil said about his mother, what Neil said about *him*-

Fuck him. Fuck *them* .

Before he even reaches Max, Billy sets his mind on what he's about to do next. He has the vague sense that he's not thinking straight, that he's just seeing red, but the plan comes unbidden anyway, hasty and unwise but completely beyond Billy's control. He hardly has the chance to knock before the bathroom door opens quietly and carefully. Maxine looks up at him, her bright eyes two wide, nervous circles. "I'll change," she says, voice so wary that there's no way she didn't hear everything. "I'm really sorry. Just give me a minute and we'll leave."

"I left my gym bag in my room," Billy says, voice quiet, the muscle in his jaw tensed. "I'm gonna go get it. When you hear me knock on the door, grab the bag and throw whatever you wanna wear to school in it."

She just stares at him. "Why?"

"Because they're not stupid, alright?" he says, a little sharper than he should. "If they check your bag and find your clothes in it, you're fucked. They won't think to look in mine."

"That's not what I'm saying," she says. "I mean, why would you do that for me?"

"Because you were right, okay? I get it. I get it more than anyone," Billy says, glancing quickly over his shoulder. "And because he can go fuck himself. Now hurry up and change. We've got to be quick if we're gonna get away from it."

Max tries to hide it, but relief washes over her, a sort of excitement that reminds Billy just how much of a kid she still is. Then,

something changes in her face. “Billy, if this is just gonna land you in more trouble, maybe we shouldn’t-”

“Goddamnit, Max, just shut up and do what I said,” he hisses back. He turns from her, careful to keep silent, and she doesn’t say another word. The door closes quietly behind him and he knows she’s yanking off her worn jeans for whatever dress her mother set out for her today.

The intention here is clear, he’s not doing it for her. Billy knows he isn’t. He knows this is all impulse and recklessness, spurred on by the fury pounding in his head. He’s doing this to spite his father. He’s doing this to fuck with Susan’s pathetic attempt at playing disciplinarian. He’s not doing this for Max- this burden of a step-sister he never asked for- but he rummages his room for his gym bag anyway. He reminds her when she forgets to throw her tennis shoes in his bag. He walks right past Susan and his father, his hand fastened tight over the strap of his gym bag and Max marching right along in front of him, the skirt of her dress swaying with each step. And when they make it out the house unstopped and unquestioned, a relief washes over Billy but it doesn’t feel entirely his alone.

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They drive in silence for five minutes before Billy pulls over on a quiet road framed with trees, where no one is likely to see them. He doesn’t explain himself when he steps out of the car, but perhaps he doesn’t have to- Max wriggles her way into the backseat of the Camaro in a flash. The few cars that drive past them can’t catch a glimpse of anything at the speed they’re going, but Billy stands with his back to the backseat window anyways.

The car radio is playing some soft, low song Billy doesn’t like and he reaches over to change the station, his focus split between the turn-dial and the road before them. They’re driving again, all that quiet interrupted by *The Scorpions* now, but Max is beaming. She’s smiling like something straight out of an old time commercial, the image of glee as she zips up her hoodie.

“You wanna tone it down a bit?” Billy finally says, giving her a dry

look. "You look like a Cabbage Patch Kid, it's getting creepy."

"Figures you'd think smiling is creepy," Max snorts. She makes a bit of a show of glancing at the rear-view mirror on her side of the car. "I finally look normal again."

"Yeah, well, you keep all that goofy look on your face and it's gonna get stuck like that. You got the cheeks of a gerbil, you know that?" Billy pulls a face, a sardonic mimic of the way Max is smiling, his cheeks inflated with held breath. "You'll look like a real clown then."

It doesn't do anything to dampen her mood but, then again, Billy supposes he didn't quite mean to take things that far. But he can practically see Max thinking something up and she hesitates for a while before speaking it. "Can I ask you a question?"

Billy shrugs.

Max seems to take his silence for permission. "All this stuff with my mom might blow over, I think. She has her little phases, you know. When I was seven she tried to get me into dance one summer and I think I went maybe three times before she dropped it." She takes a breath, considering her words. "I think your dad is just holding her to it more than I'm used to."

Billy presses down on the gas a little more than he has to, the car pressing forward a little faster. "So what? You want me to apologize for how much of a dick my dad is or something?"

"It just got me to thinking about you," Max says, unbothered by his sarcasm. It's *annoying* how unbothered she is. "You're probably gonna take this the wrong way, but remember how I said no one complains about how you dress? How do you get away with it?"

Billy blinks. He didn't quite expect *that*. He thinks about it for a bit, long enough that Max seems to take it to mean she's being ignored because she slumps against the passenger window and stares outside. When he answers, she turns her head to stare at him. "I guess I was kinda like you," he tells her. "I always give him hell about it. I'd cut the sleeves off my shirts and shit, take whatever my friends from school wanted to give away. I must've looked fucking stupid back

then, but you weren't gonna catch me dead in a polo."

Max smiles at that.

"I was probably your age when I started shoplifting," Billy continues, not quite sure why he's saying what he is. It's been a weird morning, he thinks to himself, and maybe there's just something weird in the air. "I got away with it for a long time, too, until the one time I didn't. My old man gave me the whipping of a lifetime, but I guess he figured I wasn't gonna stop. He started giving me an allowance a while after that and I just started buying my own stuff from then on. Doesn't mean he wouldn't talk shit about what I'd wear, but I guess he drew the line at telling me what to buy with my own money."

Granted, Billy thinks, it's never quite been his *own* money, has it? If he's being honest, he doesn't really know why Neil has never cut off his allowance, but Billy always chalked it up to how strange his father could be sometimes, how fickle his cruelty could be. Thankfully Max doesn't press any further than that. "Why does he care so much about this sorta thing?" she asks him instead. "About this whole, uh- you know, um-"

"All this ' *queer shit* '?" Billy finishes for her, shooting her a look. "How the hell would I know?"

"Is he religious or something?"

"Man, is that *really* the best thing you could come up with?" Billy snorts. "No, he's not *religious*. Welcome to the family, Max, I'm real glad to see you've been paying attention."

"Well, I don't see you offering any explanations, genius."

Billy turns the steering wheel, the first smooth curve of road before two others on the way to Max's school. "He had a real bitch of a grandma apparently," he says. "His folks kicked the bucket when he was a kid, so I guess that's why she raised him. She was real traditional, I guess. 'Spare the rod, spoil the child' sorta thing. He's told me a few stories. The way he used to talk about her made it sound like she crawled straight outta hell."

Max stays quiet for a little while. "I didn't know his parents died."

"Figures. He only talks about them when he's drunk," Billy shrugs, before realizing what he's said. He can feel Max staring at him and he glances at her, all wide-eyed and quiet, before turning his focus back over the dashboard. "He used to drink. I guess you didn't know that either."

The truth is too much to lay entirely bare. Years ago, his father would drink often, but seldom too much in a single sitting. Billy would come home from school each afternoon and, as if his arrival signaled the beginning of some unbearable struggle, Neil would settle down at the kitchen table, staring blankly in the direction of their secondhand TV, and work his way through a bellyful of beer.

Back then, Billy never saw him stumble or slur, but when he drank his father's typical air of distaste turned into something sharper, more volatile. It wouldn't be until Billy was about nine years old, when the anniversary of his mother's loss from their lives reared its head for the very first time, that things took a turn for the worst. From then on, beer turned into whiskey. Sharp criticism turned into yelling. Thrown doors turned into shattered dishes and broken toys. Neil's temper, like his fists, tightened like a spring, perpetually coiled to snap.

Susan helped settle him. Gone were the days of day-drinking and threats of eviction. Of course, Neil lost none of his ferocity and Billy wasn't spared his fair share of bruises. But beatings were less frequent now, less aimless- for eight, long years there was no rhyme or reason to what would set his father off. Sobriety now gave his father a sense of righteous indignation- violence as punishment, injury as just desserts. Out of his drunken haze, there was now something glaringly personal about Neil's targeting of Billy; as if he recognized something in him, something intimate and shameful, that would destroy them both upon release.

Truth be told, Billy would rather not follow *that* particular train of thought so early in the morning.

"I know all we do is argue and act like we hate each other, but your mom actually helped," Billy says to his sister at last, a little

noncommittally. “He settled down after she came around.”

Max doesn't ask about Neil's alcoholism or about his grandmother or anything that feels more like a landmine than a history. Instead, she rolls the window down and closes her eyes, the wind whipping against the orange flare of her hair. “ You know, I wanted to like you,” she tells him. “When we first met, I mean. I thought maybe we'd have some stuff in common and everything happening with Mom was so weird, you know? I guess I just wanted someone who knew how freakin' weird it was to see your parent dating. But, you just- I dunno, it felt like there was nothing I could do. You've hated me since the second you saw me.”

“I don't hate you,” Billy says and it sounds like a poorly concealed lie, even to his own ears. He doesn't know why, but that makes his heart clench in a strange brand of self-loathing. The truth is liking her was never even an option.

She gives him a look now. “You don't act like it.”

“Yeah, well, says the one who tranquilized me.”

“You were threatening my friends!” Max says to him, properly annoyed now. “You could've ki-”

“If you say I could've killed them one more goddamn time, I'm throwing you out the car.”

“Maybe if you actually had some friends of your own you'd understand,” she says. It's a thoughtless slip of the tongue, he knows, because she catches herself immediately, and looks at Billy warily. It's the sort of look Billy's very used to offering, but not to receiving. “No offense.”

“How the fuck is that not supposed to offend me?” he asks, voice so loud she flinches. “I *had* friends, you snot, you just never met them. I never brought them home.”

“Why didn't you?”

Billy rolls his eyes. What a stupid question. “Because Dad didn't like



them, Einstein.” Then, after a moment’s irritation, he relents. “Granted, he doesn’t like anybody.”

Max snorts, recognizing the joke for what it is. Still, she’s a little quieter than Billy wants her to be and when she speaks, her voice is so quiet it almost gets lost to the wind. “Sometimes I think he doesn’t really even like mom.”

It’s a relief to drive up to her school then and know that Billy has a reasonable excuse not to wrangle for a response to that. He doesn’t quite know what to tell her, how to deter her from a thought so bleak or if he even ought to. Thankfully, Max doesn’t seem to linger on it. Instead she seems to sense, just as much as he does, that the moment has passed.

“Would it be okay if I left club a little early so I can change before anyone else sees me? I don’t wanna do it at school. My friends have been really weird about the clothes,” Max tells him instead, tugging her backpack out from the backseat.

“You mean those same friends you almost shanked me over?” Billy asks. When Max’s look shifts back to one of real irritation, he just shrugs at her. “Look, I *really* don’t care. So long as you don’t keep me waiting, it doesn’t make a difference to me.”

When she steps out the car, she doesn’t slam the door behind her. She lingers instead and Billy almost doesn’t want to look at her, doesn’t want to dignify the inevitable Hallmark moment she’s looking for with any real validation. But, despite himself, he does. He looks at her, frown etched on his face all the while, and when she thanks him, the sincerity in her voice is as apparent as the blue in the sky. She knows better than to wait for any sort of response and he, sitting in a strange silence, watches her go.

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Billy wonders how much longer Harrington can get away with it. He wonders if he’ll ever lean over just far enough to come falling out of his desk completely.

Calculus is the only class they share, but sometimes Billy suspects Harrington doesn't know that. Billy sits in his blindspot, nestled in the corner of the room where Harrington would never think to look so long as Nancy Wheeler sits beside him. They are two of the only kids who sit at the very front of the class, even though Harrington shouldn't be there- not when he's so bad at math. Especially not now, when he's got his face tucked into the crook of his elbow, fast asleep.

Their teacher is an old man, the sort of person who would've retired decades ago if his job wasn't the only thing on earth keeping him relevant and when he turns from the chalkboard, Nancy elbows Harrington's side. He jolts upright, but not quickly enough to escape attention. Mr. Fandel walks to his desk, a grave frown tugging at the wrinkles of his face, and Harrington's form slumps.

"Steve, how would we determine the absolute extrema of the given function on the board?" he asks, arms crossed over his chest. "I imagine you really must have a handle on this lesson if I'm boring you so much."

"Uh, well..." Harrington begins. Billy watches as he glances at Nancy to no avail. He nervously cards through his hair. "Well, this is a polynomial question. So, we have to solve that first."

"You're going to *solve* a polynomial?" the teacher asks, brows furrowed.

Harrington mumbles something, but it doesn't quite carry enough for anyone to hear. "I think that what he means to say is that we're *dealing with* polynomials," Nancy interjects, over the class act. "Which means that the next step would be to-"

"I didn't ask you to answer the question, Nancy. I asked him," the teacher says. "If you insist on doing his work for him, you can share the marks he'll be losing for sleeping in class."

Billy rolls his eyes. Does Harrington have any sense of how ridiculous he looks next to her? He's out of place here and her presence, her inexhaustible need to assert herself as the smartest person in the room, only makes that more obvious. Drumming the eraser-end of his pencil against his desk, Billy feels restless, a little sick of himself. He's

too damn familiar with the back of Harrington's head. He's too used to letting his stare drift to him when there's nothing there to stop him. He shouldn't know that Harrington spent most of yesterday's class asleep. He shouldn't know that he'll likely fall back to sleep now or spend practice fighting back yawns as he sits on the bleachers. He shouldn't know that the usual, almost-drowsy quality of his eyes has become more pointed now, more stressed.

When the teacher turns his attention back to the board, Nancy reaches across the space between her desk and Harrington's own and her hand settles on his forearm. She gives it a squeeze and whispers something indiscernible to him. Harrington's shoulders rock with quiet laughter.

Billy shouldn't notice. He doesn't care. He doesn't allow himself to think much about it as he rips a sheet of paper from his journal, crumbling it up into a ball in his fist. He doesn't quite consider what he'd do if she looks back to him for it or if, worse still, the teacher catches him doing it. Still, he throws the paper her direction, satisfied enough when it just bounces off her shoulder. A few kids in the class snicker as she jumps upright at the unexpected contact and when she gives everyone behind her a backwards glance, her gaze is confused and searching and it doesn't fall on Billy.

But her hand doesn't fall back on Harrington after that.

Not that it matters.

Hardly five minutes pass before Harrington is slouched over his desk again, his back rising and falling with slow, easy breaths. Nancy turns to him, her profile turned just enough that Billy catches the indiscernible look on her face, some mess of pity and discomfort. She leans forward, whispering at him to no avail, no doubt trying to wake him up. Billy knows there's no good reason to keep doing this. In truth, he doesn't allow himself to think on it much. He rips out another piece of paper and he crumples it. He hits her square on the face, the paper ball bouncing off her cheek and falling to the floor.

When she looks over her shoulder this time, she looks right at him, eyes narrowed and fierce and puzzled. For a moment, Billy thinks he's crossed some line, overplayed his hand. He imagines Nancy

telling the teacher. He imagines her shaking the boy sitting next to her instead, waking him and making a show of relaying some accusation. He thinks of Harrington looking back at him, angry and resentful but looking at him nonetheless.

Instead, Nancy whispers in his direction, hissing through her teeth: “*What?*”

Billy grins at her, a practiced play at flirtatiousness that is all teeth and empty charm as he leans back in his chair. “Just wanted your eyes, sweetheart.”

Nancy *glares* at him. She’s just about to snap back at Billy when Mr. Fandel calls her name, voice sharp. Billy watches as she jumps, completely started, before her face reddens with genuine embarrassment. She turns back around, but Billy doesn’t need to see her face to know she’s mortified. She shrinks beneath the teacher’s scolding, her insufferably prim posture now crestfallen, her head ducked down as she apologizes for disrupting the lesson.

Nancy’s mood is dampened for the rest of the class and it shows. She never quite really unfurls from the insecurity that settles over her after this and, perhaps oddest of all, she doesn’t raise her hand to answer every other question posed to the class. Gone is her usual peppiness, her unbearable insistence to put her intelligence on display over and over again. Harrington, for his part, never realizes it. He doesn’t wake up until the school bell rings shrilly above them.

None of this lifts any of the burden off Billy’s chest, of course. He wasn’t quite looking for that. A fierce, unshakable tightness has lodged itself somewhere too deep in his chest to be shaken. This doesn’t help. This doesn’t change anything. But when Harrington goes to his feet, rubbing the drowsiness from his eyes, and he doesn’t think to ask Nancy about the uncharacteristic slouch in her form before walking out the classroom door, Billy thinks this is close enough.

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For the second time since Wednesday, Billy avoids the counselor’s

office. It is an irritating thing to feel, deep down, that he is doing something wrong. It doesn't make any sense, of course. He doesn't owe her anything. His business is his own, as private and secreted away as the bruises now fading from the surface of his skin. When he makes his way from his last class and to the gym on the first floor of the school, he isn't exactly looking out for Ms. Nessen but he's watchful. He doesn't quite know what he's watchful for.

There's no winning, though. Beyond the bounds of all reason, Billy feels as though he's stuck in a fog. He doesn't want to see her, but he knows he has to. He's happy to avoid her, but is irritated all the same. By the time basketball practice starts, Billy is tense and irritated not only at her, at the obligation of having to meet her, but at everything and everyone.

The good thing about anger, even the aimless sort, is anyone can *use* it if they only know how. Billy always can. He makes it through basketball without losing a moment's stamina, constantly on his toes, and he channels all of the day's aggression outwards. He runs. He defends. When the other boys get in his way, he dodges and steals and sprints his way around and against them. He's playing a good fucking game and Coach Wilson tells him so, clapping loudly from the sidelines.

Billy doesn't need his approval, but he can't deny it helps.

If he really were to stop and think about it, maybe this is precisely why he's always gravitated to basketball in the first place. Billy spends so much time in his own head, subjected to the whirlwind of shame and anger and darkness his turmoil of thoughts so often are, but this is simple. It doesn't take much thinking. It's all instinct, it's all knowing how to make it from one moment to the next and knowing how to read people before they act, and Billy's good at that. He's had to be. So, he just runs, he moves, he takes and he takes and more often than not, he scores.

Billy's on fire and it is, admittedly, the best he's felt in days, so it naturally doesn't last very long.

The segue between routine basketball practice with the team and remedial drills with the half-dozen boys who made it on Coach

Wilson's blacklist is marked by the blow of a whistle. Harrington, who had been absent for all of practice, walks into the gym just as most of the team ushers out.

Billy notices because he can't help but notice. Finding the shape of him in a crowd is, at this point, a matter of instinct that Billy can't at all help, but would much rather do without- less like curiosity or sincere investment and more like a hawk having a natural inclination towards the scurry of a mouse. Harrington is, for all accounts and purposes, a pest. Not the 'king' Tommy and half the school made him out to be. Not the fighter Billy hoped he was in the Byer's house. He's a nuisance and when Billy lines up with the other boys for warm-ups, he makes sure to stand in such a way that he can't see the other boy at all.

Coach Wilson blows his whistle again. Now they're due for one-on-one games again and Billy doesn't mind it. He catches the basketball one of the boys casually throws his way and turns to the person next to him before Wilson explains that they're not doing their usual bout of shifting today.

"I've noticed rotations aren't working out with you guys," Coach Wilson explains, careful to address the general audience when everyone knows what he really means is Harrington. "So, I'm going to assign partners. Stop it with the grumbling, now- if you need to switch partners, give me a good enough reason and I'll switch ya'll out. Let's just give this a try."

*Partners* . Of all things in the world, he's assigning partners. Billy doesn't even bother holding his breath, he just throws the basketball in his hands up and out but with far too much force. The ball clangs hard off the hoop's metal ring and bounces hard off the polished floors. It doesn't take a genius to know where this is going next. Ever since he and Harrington were first thrown together two days ago, Wilson has been trying to nudge them back together. He'd done as much yesterday, in fact, when Harrington's attempt at partnering up with Tommy almost led to a fight.

The funny thing is Harrington brings a good game. Still, when Wilson calls their names together, the two turn to each other and neither seem particularly enthused. *Complain about it* , Billy thinks in

Harrington's direction, glaring at him. *C'mon, man, you did it once, do it when it fuckin' counts.*

Harrington doesn't say a word.

He jogs to where the ball Billy sent flying has rolled up to instead and he throws it back to Billy without any bite. Casual, in fact, almost friendly. It's fucking bizarre, but it doesn't have to mean jackshit. He doesn't speak to him. He hardly looks right at him. They fall into rhythm quickly and easily and before either of them know it, they're going head to head as well as always.

Then, Harrington gets the upper-hand. Billy is running, dribbling the ball with too open a stance when Harrington catches the ball on the uptake. He tries to sprint to the opposite side of the court but Billy is right behind him. He's *too* behind him. There's next to no space between Billy's chest and Harrington's back and the older boy tries to shove him back, but Billy is right there. The contact is getting rough, just towing the line of warranting a foul, but Coach Wilson never calls them out for it. Maybe he doesn't see. Heat travels up Billy's neck all the same, his stomach twisting itself into knots.

The other boy throws his weight back just as Billy thinks they're pressing forward. It sends Billy tumbling forward before being pushed back and then Harrington's twisting out of his reach. But Harrington moves too quickly. He's reckless about it. Billy doesn't quite catch it, but his ankle must twist, the ball must move in a way Harrington doesn't expect, because then *he's* the one stumbling.

What happens next isn't intentional. It's just a matter of impulse. Just as Harrington is about to fall flat on his face, Billy reaches out for him. His grip is tight as a vice on the material of Harrington's shirt as he yanks him upright.

Crisis averted. No harm done. Still, Billy lets go of Harrington like he's just made contact with a burning stove. "You were gonna fall," he explains, inexplicably feeling as though he has to.

The other boy just stands there, eyes round. "Yeah, I was there," he says finally, but there is no malice there, no sarcasm or patronizing tone. "Thanks, I guess."

His breathing is hard and his face is flushed and for god's sake, Billy wishes he could go one damn moment without *noticing* . He sucks his teeth and turns away, reaching down for the ball before he throws it, without any gentleness, right into Harrington's hands.

Just like that, they're back at it again. They're playing as well as they were before, but something has shifted. It's not exactly that Harrington was acting particularly hostile; instead, the air he gives off, which Billy understood as a sort of well-earned aversion, melts into something a little less sharp. Their game continues, play after play, and Harrington offers a quick word here and there: an impressed hum when Billy makes a particularly challenging shot, a curse under his breath when Billy intercepts a half-court shot.

It's a bizarre and unwelcomed change that Billy doesn't know what to do with. Honestly, he'd rather that Harrington stop, so, he doesn't offer him any response. He hardly looks him in the eye. When Coach Wilson blows the whistle and sends the boys to the locker-room, Billy doesn't even bother sparing Harrington a backwards glance. Billy turns on his heel just as Harrington makes his way to the basketball hoop and if he makes the shot he aims for then, Billy isn't around to see it happen.

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When Billy drives into the Hawkins Middle School parking lot, Maxine is already waiting for him. It's late enough in the evening that no one else is really around and, considering the fact that the AV Club has no other members besides Max and her dorkish friends, it'll likely stay that way. Still, Max scrambles into the back of the Camaro in a panicked rush, hardly sparing Billy a word until she closes the door behind him.

"So, is this going to be our thing now?" she says to him through the cracked window, her voice a little muffled as she shuffles around in the car. "Because I kinda like this. It's *sneaky* ."

"It's dangerous is what it is," Billy corrects, taking a long drag from his cigarette. "We're gonna have to be careful if you're gonna get away with this in time for your mom to get over this little pet project of hers."



“Well, you’re all about sneaking around, aren’t you? That’s what you did back in Oakland.”

Billy’s taken aback by that. His thoughts immediately go to California, to the last weeks they spent living there before his father had discovered what he’d been up to with one of the boys a few houses down. *Sneaking around*, he thinks. That’s what his father had screamed at him the night before he and Susan announced the move. *What’re you sneaking around with that spick for?* Billy breathes funny, coughing on the inhale until he’s struggling to clear his throat. “The hell is that supposed to mean?” he asks.

Max blows a raspberry, a dismissive sound. “Hello? *One of us* was an expert shoplifter, remember?”

He rolls his eyes, biting back the immediate impulse to curse her out for the moment’s panic. *Jesus Christ*, he thinks, *talk about a goddamn false alarm*. “Yeah, well, I didn’t say it so you could go around spreading the word.”

When he hears the sound of a nearing car, Billy is immediately relieved he’s standing with his back to the passenger window just as he did in the morning, protecting her modesty despite the apparent emptiness surrounding them. He parked the car next to the wide trunk of an old cedar tree, not quite expecting his step-sister to change in the school parking lot but grateful, all the same, that he’d done so- it saves him the trouble of having to worry about anyone seeing her from the other side of the car.

But then Billy’s eyes land on the car in question. His stomach sinks. He cants his head back, the image of exasperation, blowing a mouthful of cigarette smoke out into the dark, cold air. “Jesus freakin’ Christ,” he grumbles to himself. “What’s Harrington doing here?”

“He’s probably picking everyone up,” Max offers from inside. “He’s really close to the guys. I think he used to date Mike’s sister. You think you can control yourself long enough for me to put on my shoes or do we gotta high-tail it out of here before you go for a round two?”

“Oh, shut the hell up.”

Harrington’s BMW does a wide turn, wide enough that Billy almost entertains the hope that he won’t draw anywhere near him, but *that* quickly falls through. The car rolls up just close enough that he and Billy meet each other’s wary stares, a look of mutual distaste on both of their faces.

“Are you locked out of your car or just on the look-out for more twelve-year olds to threaten?” Harrington asks him, eyes narrowed.

“I could ask you the same thing, couldn’t I?” Billy spits back. “My bad, I forgot. You spend your free time *hanging out* with twelve-year olds. How’s the kiddie collection going along, you bordering on the dozens yet?”

Just then, Max jerks the passenger door open and sends her brother tottering. When she steps out of the Camaro, properly dressed with Billy’s gym bag in hand, she spares her step-brother a sharp look before walking up to Harrington’s car to speak to him. She whispers something to him Billy can’t hear and he grins at her, giving her a dismissive wave of the hand.

“Hold the phone,” Harrington says then, a little louder. His brows furrow as he gives his wristwatch a glance. “What’re you even doing out here, kid? Doesn’t club end in ten minutes?”

She shrugs. “I just had to step out early is all.”

Billy watches as he nods, giving her a sympathetic smile after he glances at the clothes she’s changed into, a maroon dress etched with bubbly flowers. “I guess talking to your parents didn’t work out, huh?”

“Not exactly,” Max replies.

“That really sucks,” he says to her. “You really don’t deserve all the grief, y’know.”

Billy tries to keep the look of surprise off his face. He’s not entirely shocked that she wouldn’t keep shut about something like this- he

basically threatened her into keeping quiet about the shit going on at home just the other day, after all. But, it's the air of familiarity between them that catches Billy entirely unaware. He tries to imagine the two of them together, talking about things that matter, but can't quite manage it.

Billy doesn't understand why she does it, but Max wiggles unzipped Billy's gym bag in front of him, where her ratty, old jeans are still sticking out. "Don't sweat it," she says to him. "We thought we'd try something else out instead."

Harrington frowns, clearly confused. Billy can practically see him working over the word 'we' in his head before he looks in Billy's direction. There's no one else, really, that Max could mean except for her brother, but the concept seems too bizarre for Harrington to take seriously. When Max whispers something else him, his eyes raise to find Billy's own.

"That's good, I guess," he says, still bewildered. Harrington blinks, searching quickly across Billy's face for some sort of confirmation, perhaps, but seemingly displeased by what he finds there. When Billy rolls his eyes at him, raising his cigarette back to his mouth to take another deep lungful of it, Harrington's own immediately narrow.

In the few minutes that pass between them, Billy doesn't goad either of them on for any more arguments. He doesn't acknowledge or strain to listen in to whatever else Max has to say to Billy's classmate. He keeps his body lax instead, careful to look entirely unbothered, wholly and utterly bored. When he settles into the Camaro, he turns on the radio. He raises it up loud. By the time he finishes his cigarette, flicking the butt out his window, Billy's patience has finally thinned. As if one cue, the school doors open in the near distance. Max's friends come shuffling out and, springing into action, Max quickly says her goodbyes to Steve Harrington before rushing into her step-brother's car.

Billy sends the car in reverse with a dangerously fast, jerking motion. In the rear-view mirror, he catches just the quickest glance of Lucas Sinclair, staring back at them with a vague look of nervousness. Billy *hates* the look on his face. He hates the night Lucas now reminds him of. He hates Harrington and his wary, disbelieving stare and the

ridiculous sound of his laughter as the Max's friends clamor around him, shouting about some crazy failed experiment.

If Max has anything to say about how hastily he makes his way out of the parking lot, she doesn't say so. Billy feels her disapproval all the same, hanging unspoken in the space between them.

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

Hello, all! First, I need to apologize. I've not been this late on an update in quite a long time and I hope you guys can't forgive me for it. I have a doctor's note to excuse the delay and everything ♥️ I hope you all enjoyed this chapter. It, perhaps, ran a little longer than other chapters have. I kept thinking about cutting scenes or splitting the chapter in half, but eventually I settled on the notion that this chapter needed to be shared as it was. This is the one, after all, that signals a shift not only in Billy's relationship with Max, but in his relationship with Steve. A dear friend told me she truly has no idea how these boys will get from where they are now to where they'll end up by the end of the story. That's both an exciting and daunting thing to hear- soon, my friends, I think we'll see the momentum rolling. For now, I hope you enjoyed the update. I'm dying to hear what you all think.

## 7. Chapter 7

It's not that Billy cares what people would think, because he doesn't. He just doesn't want to deal with the inevitable questions that would follow anyone knowing where he runs off to during lunch period. Everything is fodder for gossip in Hawkins, especially at school, from the most spectacular to the most mundane. Sure, Billy has been curious about a fair share of rumors himself, but that doesn't mean he can't recognize a vicious cycle when he sees one: When Barbara Holland was officially declared dead, everyone hardly batted a lash. Her relevance had run its course; the stories surrounding her bizarre disappearance had long lost their appeal. Even the fight between Billy and Harrington is old news. Now, the talk of the school is that Margaret Lang had a meltdown while screwing around with an ouija board at last Friday's party.

Well, the only thing the country bumpkins at Hawkins High would love more than some crater-faced sophomore into cult shit is a town crazy. So, all things considered, Billy doesn't need anybody knowing he's got to spend an hour a day in front of a shrink. He doesn't give a shit what anyone has to say about him, really he doesn't, but when the bell rings at the end of fifth period, Billy is the first one out the door. He jumps out of his seat, tugs his jacket on, and only spares a moment's care to properly zipping up his bag, where the lavender corduroy of Max's dress peaks out beneath his school books.

All Billy needs is a sharp left, a fast stride, and he'll be lost amongst the crowd, but of course it isn't that easy. It never is. He's halfway down the hall when he hears Tommy shout after him: "Hold up! Where are you headed off to like that? Wait for me!"

Billy has to fight back the urge to duck his head. There's just no ignoring Tommy now without it looking deliberate, but he doesn't stop walking. He only slows. He spares a glance over his shoulder, making sure to wipe the annoyance from his face, nonchalant to the utmost. "Just headed to the nurse's office," Billy says. "I've had a bitch of a headache since homeroom."

Tommy nudges his head towards the furthest stairwell. "But the nurse's office is *that* way."

“Right,” Billy says. *Fuck* . Of course he’d get that wrong. “I wanted to take the long way down. Avoid the crowd.”

There’s no missing the frown on Tommy’s face. “That doesn’t even make any sense.”

Before he can continue, Billy takes a covert step to the side, so that the students shuffling out of a nearby classroom can herd between them. Tommy tiptoes to look over the crowd, locking eyes with Billy, but whatever he shouts gets lost to the noise in the school halls. Whatever. He doesn’t particularly care what Tommy has to say, he’ll survive a period without him. Billy knows he’ll have to come up with a better lie next time and that Tommy, prissy as he can be, is going to bitch about getting bailed on, but it doesn’t really matter. The fact is Billy would rather deal with that than explain anything to him or, worse still, get caught red-handed.

It’s not a secret, Billy thinks, but that doesn’t mean it’s anybody’s business either. The eastmost stairwell is relatively empty and a feeling Billy refuses to recognize as relief flushes over him by consequence. When he lands on the second floor, Billy doesn’t straggle around looking for door numbers. He knows exactly where he’s headed: an easy turn of this upcoming corner and a straight walk down until he gets to room 505 except—

Except Diana’s office is two doors down from the photography club’s darkroom.

The door opens and Billy jolts back behind the corner has was only just then turning, startled but out of sight. He doesn’t realize he’s holding his breath until he releases it and he goes still. He knows the voice that carries through the hallway. It’s Nancy’s. She’s talking to someone, her voice warm with laughter, and whoever it is replies to her, but their voice is too low and mumbled to make out from where Billy stands. He takes the risk of secreting a glance in her direction and then Billy sees them. Nancy’s not going to catch him, Billy realizes, because she’s distracted. She’s tunneled all her focus on the tired-eyed boy who follows after her.

*Jonathan Byers, really?*

Billy recognizes the sight before him for the secret it is. Nancy and Jonathan stand so close together at the open doorway they're almost touching; their voices are hushed, their smiles timid and shared. When Jonathan's hand rises to trace the bone of Nancy's wrist, Billy expects her to stiffen or whisk out of reach- last Billy heard, she and Harrington were on a bit of dry spell, but that couldn't have been more than two weeks ago. Besides, with how friendly they still are with each other, Billy- who would never admit to having given the state of their relationship so much thought- figured they were back on the up and up. But Nancy doesn't move away. She doesn't flinch. She smiles on, looking up at Jonathan shyly, and leans into his touch.

Fucking hell. Nancy didn't break up with Harrington, she *left* him. She left him for the biggest creep in school. Who's to say wasn't fucking around with Byers while Harrington was still chasing her skirt?

Billy watches as they walk down to the farthest stairwell, their backs to him, their sides flirting as they waver on and off of touch. In truth, he doesn't know how to feel. He has the vague sense he's *supposed* to find this hysterical or satisfying or, if nothing else, laughably pathetic. But he doesn't. When he tries to name the bitterness in his mouth, each word falls short, as sore and uncomfortable as ill-fitting shoes. It isn't lost on him that Billy has finally gotten what he wanted: a way to hurt Harrington in earnest, a way to properly humiliate him, to finally get the the anger, the resentment, the undivided attention he tried to pummel out of Harrington in the Byers' house. This should feel good. This should feel powerful.

But it doesn't.

He doesn't have an answer for the mess of strange feelings inside him. He doesn't have it in him to work it out. When the coast is clear, Billy carries that knot in his stomach into the counselor's office, where Prince croons over soaring guitar riffs on the radio.

Diana looks up when he opens the door. The smile on her face is immediate. "Look who it is!" she says. "I haven't heard a word from you since last week. Where've you been?"

Billy frowns, throwing his bag down and taking a seat. "Around."

"I was worried," she tells him. "Wilson told me you've been coming into practice, but he couldn't say what you'd been up to otherwise."

"Worried I got into another fight?"

"Worried you weren't coming back."

Immediately, Billy wonders what difference that would make to her, but he knows better than to ask. Instead, he says: "I was busy. I took a look at the hours, I can afford to miss a few days."

Diana makes a wordless sound in reply, like he's said something agreeable instead of totally unconvincing. "Well, sit down. I'm happy to see you. What's on your mind?"

His mind immediately goes to Nancy, to Jonathan, to what he saw outside the darkroom. "Nothing," he lies. "It's just been a normal day."

"How about you take me through your normal day then?"

"You serious?" The incredulity in his voice makes it sound as if she's asked the stupidest question in the world. When she nods, he scoffs in her face. "Man, we're really starting off hot, aren't we? Take you through my day. I got up and had breakfast. I took my sister to school. Went to class. Nothing particularly mind blowing about it." When Diana keeps quiet, Billy narrows his eyes. "That's all you wanna know?"

"I just think it'd be best if you tell me whatever you feel like sharing today."

"You want me to just sit here and tell you the most boring shit in the world just because it *came to mind*?"

"Is that so bad?" she asks.

"It sounds like a waste of time," Billy snaps back. "I'm supposed to sit here for, what, nearly an hour and you want me to talk about what I had for breakfast? Aren't you supposed to ask me about important shit?"



“Well, what kind of questions do you want me to ask?”

Whatever response Billy expected, that wasn't it. It's annoying how nonchalant she is, how difficult it feels to get a genuine rise out of her. He doesn't know why his mind goes there, but Billy realizes how unlike his father she is, how she shares none of his temper or Susan's hysterics. He doesn't know what to do with someone so steady. “I dunno,” he says then. “You're the counselor, aren't you? Shrink questions.”

“Shrink questions,” she repeats, her tone humorous. “You earliest memories, your Mom and Dad, what you think an inkblot looks like, that sort of thing?”

“Well, it doesn't sound like you really care.”

“Of course I care. I'm very interested in everything that you have to say.” She leans forward, looking Billy in the eye. “The truth is most people don't want to talk about that sort of thing at all, much less right off the cuff. If you wanna skip the fluff and jump right into it, you'd be the first.”

*Well, at least she's finally being honest*, Billy thinks. There's something about cutting her off in the middle of this little game she was playing that has Billy sitting up straighter. “Fine,” he says. “I live with my dad. It was his idea to come here- well, not *here*. I mean Hawkins. He doesn't know I'm here.”

“Is there a reason he doesn't know you're in counseling?”

“He'd have me drop out of school completely before he'd allow me to step a foot in here,” Billy says. “It's not like I'm exactly happy with this set-up, either, but my dad doesn't give a shit whether or not I'm off the team.”

“Wouldn't he understand it's important to you?”

Billy snorts. “He doesn't know if I'm alive half the time, okay? Doesn't care what I'm up to, doesn't care who I'm with, so long as I'm not dragging *his name* through the mud. That's all it is with him- what people say about *his* son, what people say about *his* family. The

moment I fuck up, I've got his undivided attention. He's always there for that." There's no missing the venom in his voice. It registers like a sour note. Billy catches himself. He shrugs his own comments off and tries to recover. "Anyway, when he got remarried, he said moving would give the family a fresh start. So, here we are in hicksville."

Diana frowns. "That must've been difficult for you and your sister."

"Step-sister," he corrects, rather sharply. "Max is Susan's kid."

"Right. What's she like? I imagine she's younger than you if you're dropping her off for school."

"She's annoying. She doesn't listen for shit and there's no talking to her. She thinks she's got it all figured out," he says, before tacking on: "She's thirteen."

"Oh, that all makes sense now. Annoying is usually part of the package at that age," she says, a little humorously. Though it'd pain Billy to admit it, he feels something shift inwardly at the validation; there's no bad-mouthing family in his home, certainly not in this small, good-to-do town, and she could've disapproved of his comment, but she didn't. It's a strange moment, even perhaps a good one, but then she ruins it: "Tell me about mom."

"She's gone," Billy replies. His defenses flare so quickly it's almost dizzying.

If Diana catches the tonal shift, maybe she doesn't care. "Did she pass?"

Billy's lips stretch into a thin, bloodless frown. "Remember that thing you said last time? No questions here. Not about her." When she raises her hands as if in surrender, Billy takes a breath and continues, his eyes anchored on the corner of the room. "She's been out of the picture since I was eight. She was—"

Diana doesn't speak, but it's clear she has his attention. She watches him closely, but it doesn't feel desperate or prodding. It feels patient. Billy swallows against the dry feeling in his mouth. How long has it been since he's ever spoken about her aloud? The mere mention of

his mother feels like a curse, like something sharp enough to break glass.

“She was good,” he says at last. “She was the only good I ever had. I must’ve looked stupid, but back then I just went around glued to her side. She was just- she was everything to me. I dunno what was wrong with me, but she didn’t mind. Never made me feel stupid about it, either. She was young, too, so when she-” He clears his throat. He feels as if the window that had cracked upon just enough to allow this much reflection has slammed shut, catching his fingers on the descent. “Anyways, it’s been just me and my dad ever since. Until he met Susan.”

When Billy doesn’t continue speaking, Diana looks at him. “Can I speak?” She asks. He nods, but the wariness must be apparent in his face. “I’m not going to ask any questions about your mother, I promise. I was just going to ask how long Susan and your father have been married.”

“They got married last December, so I guess it’s almost been a year.” Billy crosses his arms. “You know they only knew each other five months before they got engaged? It’s pathetic- as if you know *anyone* after five months. No wonder she’s been divorced twice.”

It’s a nasty thing to say, but Diana doesn’t chide him for it. “That sounds like an awfully short amount of time for so much change,” she says.

“What do you mean?”

Diana takes a breath, like she’s treading over something delicate. “Well, according to what you’ve told me, you’ve only had your father for most of your life. Then, he enters a relationship and remarries in less than a year’s time. Suddenly, you got a new parent figure in the house, a new sibling, and next thing you know, you’ve moved to a new town. Have I got that right?”

Billy nods tensely.

Diana recognizes the landmine she’s found herself in for what it is, because she leans back and seems to let the moment pass them after

a beat of silence. Then, as if starting a new, she says: "Tell me more about your dad."

Billy doesn't answer, he only feels himself more tense, more irritable, and silence stretches between them, taut as an arrow on a string.

"I never knew my father," Diana says at last, "I used to beat myself up over that. What a story: A little black girl born in the projects, raised without a dad. My mom did her best. But, for a long time, her best wasn't enough. I wanted a dad. I wasted so much time resenting not having that, but if my family *had* changed when I was your age, I wouldn't have known what to do with it. It would've confused me, maybe angered me. Not having a father had been my norm for so long."

"You ever think you were better off?" Billy asks. His voice sounds strange, he thinks, without any of its usual bite.

Billy scans her face for scandal or insult, but he finds none. Something just seems softer about her then. "What makes you say that?" she asks, but Billy has drawn a line on the proverbial sand and she knows it. "No questions about that either?"

His silence is answer enough. Billy knows she has more questions, that she wants to follow this down to answers too heavy to be spoken now, and he expects resistance or prodding but that never comes. She drops the issue. Bizarrely, the moment ends. She sits back in her seat and says instead: "The move must've been hard. Can we talk about that? You didn't even get to finish the school year. How do you feel about that?"

He shrugs. "It's whatever."

"Was it hard to say goodbye to your friends?"

"By the time we moved, I didn't have any." Billy knows she's going to ask him about this, so he beats her to the chase. "I mean, I had a few, I wasn't some *loser*. I had friends, but my old man didn't want me around any of 'em. There was this one person that I—" He swallows, trying to pull back what's threatened to unravel. "I got tired of him being on my case about it, so by the time I found out we were

moving, I ditched them. Didn't want the drama."

It's a good lie. It's a practiced lie. It betrays nothing about what his father caught him doing or who he found him doing it with. It betrays nothing about his father's raised fists or his drunken rage or how the other boy- whose beautiful, brown skin paled instantly and whose eyes widened impossibly round as he went stumbling back, horrified at what he saw- never quite looked Billy in the eyes after that. How, really, none of their friends did- disgust, Billy thought then, or pity. He didn't care which. Either was as degrading and demeaning as spit on his face.

The look on Diana's face must mean the lie falls short. "You think I'm lying," he says. "You and Wilson think I'm the school fuck up and now I'm telling you my dad thought someone was a bad influence on *me* . You don't believe me."

"I do believe you," she says to him. "But, what have I or Coach Wilson done to give you the sense we think so badly of you?"

"Well, it's your job to think I'm a nutcase. That's what they pay you for, isn't it? You're supposed to fix me," Billy says, his voice dripping with sarcasm. "And coach thinks I'm a ticking time bomb. He got wind of one fight and he swears I'm a second away from beating someone into a coma and now- now I'm *stuck here* because I can't afford to get off the team. If I'm not wasting time with you, I'm wasting time at his stupid drills."

"So, the reason you're here instead of being saddled with a suspension, if not an expulsion outright, is because of something Wilson did. This has nothing to do with you, is that right?"

Billy gives her a cold look. The underlying implication of fault is obvious and instantly infuriating. What exactly does she want him to say? No, that's a stupid question. Billy corrects himself. He knows exactly what she wants: an admission of fault, a confession, remorse and tears and a promise for better, kinder future where he's her perfect little pet-project who never hurts anyone again. *Fuck that* . She has no clue what happened, no inkling as to why his fist met Harrington's jaw or why Billy can hardly stand the sight of him or why anger spills off of him like water, dripping over from the excess.

"Billy, you told me your father wanted a fresh start," Diana says. "Moving to a new place doesn't mean we've suddenly been handed a new life. Wherever we go, we take our history with us: our problems, our patterns, the good and the bad. But you have something your father probably doesn't: a real chance at a clean slate. Here. In this room, at Wilson's practices, not wasting your time, just doing the work. Don't you think that's something worth taking advantage of?"

"Do you even hear yourself?" he snaps back at her. "I'm just trying to *survive* my last months here. They're not getting any better just 'cause I talk to you or run extra suicides." Billy swallows thickly and looks away from the person in front of him. "I've already burnt my bridges."

"Because of the fights?"

He laughs, a raw, broken open thing, and says, "No, because I drive an old car. O *bviously* because of the fights." Then, after a moment's silence, "Because I'm all fucked up and I'm stuck in a town where everyone's too busy saving face to admit they are, too."

"I think you're being a lot harder on yourself than you ought to be."

"What the hell would you know?" Billy spits. "You saw Harrington, didn't you? I know Wilson told you about the other fights. You can act like you know me all you want, but you don't." Then, to prove his point, he says: "I started shit with Max's friends, too."

Something in her expressions seems to flicker. A falter of suspicion or doubt, gone so quickly Billy almost misses it. "Did you hurt them?"

"If I told you I did, you'd believe me, wouldn't you?" Billy says, giving her a sick smile. She doesn't reply, so he rolls his eyes. "They're, like, twelve, alright? I didn't hurt them. I just needed to scare 'em straight. I told Max I didn't want her around this one kid, but I kept finding them together. Over and over again, after I explicitly told her to keep away from him, so I did what I had to do."

This time, Billy can feel the disapproval radiating off of her. He grates his teeth, waiting as she crosses her arms and takes a moment to speak. When she does, she asks an awful question: "Do you think

there's any connection between how you lost your friends and what you're doing here with Max?"

Billy dismissively waves his hand. "I asked for you to act like a shrink and now everything I do goes back to my dad, is that it?"

Diana gives him a look, not exactly curt but as close to it as he thinks she'll ever really get. "I just think there might be a pattern here. Did your dad pressure you into cutting ties with your old friends or was the move in the middle of the school year his way of doing it?" Billy doesn't respond, but Diana gives him a look that suggests he doesn't need to. She knows she's right. "It seems like Max has found herself in your shoes."

Billy doesn't respond. He looks at the clock on her desk for the first time since he walked in and says, voice cold and clipped, that they've only got five more minutes.

"You know, for someone who doesn't care about other people's opinions, you seem really preoccupied with the idea that everyone hates you," Diana tells him then. "In the two times we've met, I can't think of a single thing I've done to suggest I think badly of you. You just assumed I do. You've done the same thing with Coach Wilson, but when he asked me if I thought counseling would do you any good, he was genuinely concerned for you."

"What's your point?" Billy asks her, almost cutting her off.

She makes a noncommittal gesture. "It just makes me wonder what other relationships you've forfeited because you think you're playing a losing game."

Grinding his teeth, Billy snatches his bag from where he left it. He finds the paper she needs to sign buried amongst his things. But she continues. "The good thing about bridges is that you can rebuild them," she says to him. "It'll take time and work, but you might end up making your last months here your best ones. What makes you think you can't make right by your mistakes?"

He swallows, snapping back at her in his head, trying hard to force away the impulse to say something he'll regret. "Why exactly would I

do that?" he manages to say.

He goes to his feet then, but she doesn't so much as blink. When he all but shoves the paper in her face, she takes her time looking for a pen, signing the wild loops of her name. "I can't say. It just sounds to me like you have very few positive relationships right now," she answers. "If that bothers you, maybe you ought to work on that. No one wants to be disliked. No one wants to be alone. Maybe if you tried to make amends with the people around you, you wouldn't have to be."

"That's not gonna work."

"Have you ever given it a try?" she asks. Billy all but snatches the paper from her hand once she's signed it and she looks at him with raised brows, watching as he pulls back as if he's suffered a burn. "When you go the extra mile with someone, even someone you're not on the best of terms with, they notice. It might not fix anything overnight, but people respond to effort, Billy. I think you'll find that someone out there would be willing to give you a second chance if you only give them reason to."

Billy doesn't mean to, but his mind immediately goes to Max. He thinks about her excitement yesterday, the way she grinned through their drive to school. When Billy chose to help her yesterday, he didn't do it for her. The idea of doing anything to remedy their relationship was the last thing on his mind. But he can't help but think about the spring in her step when she walked out of the house this morning or how she thanked him for the ride before she ran off to class. Had she ever done that before? Had the two of them even fought at all this morning?

A part of Billy means to ridicule Diana just then. He wants to, maybe needs to, find something to say or do to make her react in a way he knows what to do with: anger, fear, hatred, anything but *this*. What even is this? She genuinely seems to care about what people think of him insofar as he cares about it. The effect is disarming and uncomfortable, like being caught in a lie.

She looks at him, but he doesn't know what to say. He won't agree, can't agree, but Billy doesn't know why he can't tell her to fuck off



all-together with her senseless optimism, with her childish attempt at inciting some change. He folds the paper, shoving it into his back pocket, and he doesn't speak to her again. She says something about seeing him again soon, but Billy hardly listens. He just gives her a half-hearted nod, before turning back out of her door and into the halls, where empty spaces begin to wane as people straggle to their rooms before the next bell rings.

It's not that Billy cares what people would think. He hurries through the stairwell until he's put enough flights between him and the counselor's office to breathe again. He doesn't care. Let people hate him. Let people know. Let fear or apprehension or interest radiate off strangers like waves, their stares and their aversions heavy, apparent, and felt. *He doesn't care.* But it bothers him to know he didn't have it in him to outright reject a single thing she said. It bothers him to feel as though anything that happened in the scant space of those four walls has got him running.

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When Harrington arrives late to practice, Billy notices. He notices the dark circles under his eyes and the tightness of his jaw and the way he stalks across the basketball court too quickly and almost trips on his own feet because of it. There's something wrong with him. He carries it plainly, leaving it bare for the world to see, and Billy notices, but he pretends not to. He dribbles the ball in his hand instead, dodging Tommy just quickly enough to slip his attempt at a block before throwing the ball up towards the hoop.

He and Tommy are both running when Harrington plants himself right in front of them. The sharp, screeching skid of their shoes against the polished floor brings everything in the gymnasium to a stand-still.

"You're supposed to be running drills with me," Harrington says flatly.

"You were late," Billy replies.

"What are you, a *teacher*? You're checking my attendance now?" he says. "Get over yourself."

It's enough that Billy imagines himself finding the front of Harrington's shirt with two, balled fists and shoving him to the floor. Billy opts for the wiser, but none the less grating option: he flat-out ignores him. He dribbles the ball once, twice, and glances in Harrington's direction only when he sprints *around* him. He carries on as if he didn't hear him at all. The game continues and though Tommy hesitates, truncated in the awkward beat between the three of them for just a moment more before he follows Billy's lead.

They hardly make it a minute into another chase before Harrington cuts them off. He says something Billy doesn't quite catch, an angry mess of mumbled words, and walks towards them. Without so much as a proper look in his direction, Billy knows Harrington is ready to *force* them to stop if he has to, but he pushes the line anyway. Why wouldn't he? Billy has the ball. He turns, making his way to the hoop for no other reason than pure antagonism, and that's what sends Harrington moving. He runs up to him, drawing close, all but shoving Tommy out of the way, and smacks the ball straight out of Billy's hand.

The ball dives down to the floor with such a force that it must've burnt Harrington's palm on the impact. It spikes back up in the air, drawing everyone's attention. From a distance, the coach calls out: "Everything alright there, boys?"

The three of them wave Coach Wilson away, offering a chorus of dismissive excuses, but his focus lingers. When he's finally moved on, Tommy motions to Harrington. "Dunno if it slipped your radar, but we *did* our bit," he says, wiping the sheen of sweat from his temple. "You don't get to stroll into practice after the hard part's over and start making calls. We're in the middle of something."

"Well, now you're not," he snaps back. "Take a hike, Tommy."

Billy and Tommy look at him for a few loaded moments and then Billy shrugs, turning to the boy beside him. "Piss off, man. You know what happens when King Steve doesn't get his way- you don't want coach riding your ass. Hell, how much you wanna bet he's still looking this way right now?"

Tommy glances over behind them and realizes, with a laugh, that

Billy is right. He shakes his head, giving Billy's shoulder a shake. It's all for show and Billy knows it. They're not friends like that. He wouldn't let Tommy touch him, but he knows Tommy wants to look like a pair, like a united force, and it benefits Billy now, so he bites his tongue. When Tommy's gone, the humor on Billy's face drops- he turns to Harrington just as he's gotten hands on the ball again and glares. "Don't pull that shit again, you hear me? I really don't care what's got your panties in a twist, but I swear to god, Harrington, if my spot on the team weren't on the line I would've."

"In case you forgot, we're *partners*," Harrington interrupts. "You don't have a choice, you're stuck with me. So, next time, wait the damn ten minutes it takes me to get here."

"Tell me what had you so busy, then," Billy says. "If you think it's good enough to leave me waiting, it's good enough to share." It's then that his mind goes to Nancy and the sudden possibility that Harrington could've been with her- he doesn't allow himself to examine why that grates at his nerves as much as it does. "Are you still chasing after that Wheeler chick? Is that what you were up to while we were running laps, begging her to get back with you?"

Harrington goes still, brows drawn tight together, apprehension written all over his face. "I'm not- I don't see how the hell that even matters to you."

Billy comes towards him then. They're close close enough that the ball in Harrington's hands, which have now only gripped tighter, is the only thing really dividing them. They're close enough that Billy can see Harrington tense at the proximity, the invisible boundaries of his personal space violated.

And then Billy takes a step *closer*.

"Then, what're you acting so needy for, huh?" Billy asks, voice so quiet only they can hear. "You said it yourself, didn't you? We're *stuck* together. Dunno what you're so getting so rattled about, unless you're afraid I'm gonna up and swap you out for someone else just like she."

Unthinkingly, Billy hesitates. Despite the long-embedded instinct to

dig his nails into this open wound precisely for its tenderness, Billy stops himself. Or it would be more accurate to say he tries to, because it's too late- the injury registers all the same. Something in Harrington face changes, confusion giving way to a resentful recognition. A genuine look of hurt.

Seconds pass and though Harrington opens his mouth to speak, he doesn't say a word. He shoves the ball between them into Billy's chest instead, knocking the wind out of him before shoving past him entirely, leaving Billy waiting for a satisfaction, however malicious it may be, which never comes.

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Billy wastes five minutes convincing Coach Wilson nothing happened between them before Harrington storms out of the gymnasium with some half-muttered excuse about a stomachache. By the time Billy's made it out of the gym and into the parking lot himself, Harrington is already in his car.

That should be the end of any half-baked attempt at damage control or whatever it is, really, that Billy is attempting to do now- because if he were to stop now, he'd be forced to confront the fact that he has no honest idea what he's trying to accomplish here with Harrington or why he thought to chase after him in the first place. This should be the precise moment in which Billy turns right back around, knowing he's already committed the grave mistake of looking like he gives a shit about any of this.

But then Harrington's BMW hiccups and shudders, letting out a long, grinding whine.

Billy watches as the car jolts, half-alive, before dying back down once, twice, three times. It's not going absolutely *anywhere* . He can't help the immediate, knee-jerk impulse to laugh at the sheer irony of the situation playing out in front of him: Steve Harrington and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day.

Before a single breath of laughter so much as rises up his throat, Billy lays eyes on Harrington in earnest. If he had ever seen him keyed up

on the court or the Byers' house, it's nothing compared what he looks like now. Harrington slams his left fist hard on the steering wheel, smacking it with the flat of his palm over and over and over again.

With the balls of his fists now raised to clamped-shut eyes, Harrington says something- he says it loud, he says it forcefully, but Billy can't make out any of the words. He doesn't really need to. The effect remains the same; suddenly, all of Billy small, meaningless observations conjoin: Harrington's perpetual exhaustion, the chip on his shoulder, the weariness that seems to seep down into his very bones. The awkward disconnect between him and Nancy, despite all their sterile and placid attempts at making good. *He knows*. He might've always known and if Billy is right in thinking something is gnawing at Harrington from the inside out, he'd bet it's that.

It's a strange conflict, Billy realizes, between the anticlimactic reaction he coaxed out of Harrington during their fight and the outrage Billy stumbles upon now. Harrington thinks he's alone. He has no idea this moment, so raw and cracked right open, is being seen, but when Billy takes it upon himself to walk over to his car, the illusion is disrupted. Harrington quickly swipes his wrist against his eyes and rolls down his car window. "I swear to God," he says, voice a bit wrecked, "if you get any closer, I'm gonna run you over."

Billy frowns. "You kinda need a working car to do that."

"Yeah, well, fuck you," he spits. Then, either out of thoughtless impulse or the genuine desire to make good on his threat, Harrington tries working the ignition of his car again. It doesn't even respond. "Damn it," he says, giving the dashboard a hard smack. "*God-fucking-damn it !*"

Billy stares openly, brows raised, but he's not unnerved. He may not know what to do with Nessen's ineffable patience or Wilson's penchant for second chances or Max's gratitude, but he knows what to do with *this*. This is frustration. This is exhaustion. This is the outrage of feeling as though the world has borne its claws and scrapped everything out of you until there's nothing left. This is anger and Billy knows anger like an old scar, like a tired song-unthinkingly and thoroughly, with all the ease of lifelong intimacy.

So, he knows not to tell him to calm down. He knows not tell him how ridiculous he looks, how fucking wuss it is to fall to pieces because your ignition is probably on the fritz. "Your car's not gonna magically start working," Billy says to him, "just 'cause you scream at it. You have to do something to fix it."

Rather than agree, Harrington gives him a sharp look, like he's only just now remembered he's not alone. "I can't believe you followed me out here," he says. "What did I ever do to you, huh? What, you can't sleep at night unless you've made my life a living hell? Kicking my ass didn't get it out your system?"

He tries again, against all reason and chance, to turn the car on but it only sounds and withers as useless as before. When Harrington storms out of his car and opens up the hood, he looks down at the car's bits and pieces like he's stumbled on something extraterrestrial.

Billy frowns as Harrington leans forward and reluctantly musses around with the car's mechanics. *You're gonna fuck up your car for real*, he thinks, but doesn't say. *You'd learn a lot of shit about fixing cars if you couldn't afford mechanics*. Billy rolls his eyes, suppressing a shiver as the cold winter air really begins to sting on his bare legs. It's too cold to be out here in gym clothes, but, unlike Harrington, he'd left all of this things in the lockers. When something metal clangs loudly and Harrington yelps, Billy decides he's had it. "That's not going to work," he says.

Harrington mumbles something nasty. He's given up. He slams the hood shut and stomps back into the car, but not before saying, "Just get the hell away from me."

Billy looks on, lips pursed and eyes narrowed, as Harrington rolls up the once-open driver's seat window. He looks to the yards and yards of open space in the school parking lot, to the indigo sky growing darker above.

He sighs.

He's just making good on a challenge. Billy tells himself he's only doing this to prove Diana Nessen wrong once and for all and get all her self-help, zen bullshit off his back for good. He's doing this now

because Steve Harrington is the last person on earth who'll let him. Bracing himself, he knocks on the glass of Harrington's window until it begrudgingly rolls back down. Before Harrington so much as opens his mouth to speak, Billy spits out: "I think it's your ignition. I could probably fix it."

Harrington just *stares* at him. "What?"

"I said it's your ignition and I- unless you've got a better idea, I could-" Billy takes a deep, labored inhale. *God, he hates this.* "Let me help."

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

It's my birthday! This chapter is not only a gift to you, it is a gift to me: I can finally sleep well tonight knowing I don't have to hang my head in shame for another day passed without an update. But, mostly it's a gift to you. I hope you enjoyed this chapter, my friends. I'm very sorry for the delay. Life found its way, in often some very rough ways, and this had to take a backseat.

I'm really, really excited for the next update- the first of many chapters where the focus will finally land on Steve and Billy alone. My darling bestie and beta said Steve and Billy "keep fighting for the sake of fighting bc they cant get the other out of their head, its like they had that big fight at the byers' and what's leftover is a scab they can not stop fucking picking at." That's exactly right. Spoiler alert, fam: they're gonna fall in love. But it's gonna be a long and turbulent journey. In the mean time, Steve is falling to pieces. We've not gotten too much of it yet, but it's important to me that this story is about both boys. Billy is the focus, no doubt, but Steve is so young and so saddled not only with heartbreak, but with trauma, with horrors, with hauntings. It was important to me that I write Steve being juvenile and prissy and taking his stress out on Billy and Tommy- he's still just a damn kid. I really can't wait for the

moment this intense, "hateful" tension finally breaks through to give us some relief.

As always, please do tell me what you think. Let me know I haven't lost you all because of my radio silence.



## 8. Chapter 8

What follows is quite possibly the most awkward moment of silence Billy has ever suffered in his life. In the safe distance where Billy has settled to stand, arms crossed and shoulders tensed in that defensive, coiled-tight posturing he's always held every time Harrington has so much as entered the room, he watches. He waits. "What, did you not hear me?" he spits, as if he's suffered insult. Billy knocks on the cold, metal surface of the car's hood. "Hello? Do you need help or not?"

Harrington jolts a little, grimacing very briefly, before that suspicious quality in his glare returns. But, he doesn't speak. He doesn't even *look* to Billy now and a flash of wild impulse tempts him to slam his fist on the car now, to properly shake him, to do something that will really warrant the rejection Billy plainly wants. It's a strange thing to yearn after, really: rejection and spite and ire. It's a stranger thing to detest receiving all the same. Try as he might to earn it, it never tastes any better on the tongue. There's no getting used to the bitterness of being disliked. He's had years of it, but to be hated still burns, no matter how much he's convinced himself he'd prefer it, like demanding someone to pour alcohol over your wounds, like tearing the band-aid off your still-raw flesh.

The silence continues. No, rather, it stretches, heavy as an oil spill, so Billy does what he does best: he acts. He moves. He grits his teeth and steels himself and marches right up to the front of Harrington's car, as if daring Harrington to tell him to make good on that empty threat of running him over.

Harrington takes it in with genuine shock. "What the hell are you doing?"

"Trying to steal your headlights," Billy replies, voice dripping with sarcasm. "Now pop the hood. I need a look at what's going on."

"You think I'm stupid enough to just *let* you fuck up my car?"

"Your car's already fucked up, genius. All I'm gonna do is see if I can get it running again."

Harrington lips thin into a harsh line. Billy can see the irritation written all over his face, but when he speaks next, he doesn't tell Billy to go fuck himself. He doesn't reject him or insult him or laugh in his face. He does something infinitely worse. He asks, "Why?"

Billy stares at other boy through the glass of the car window, tongue-tied, not having the slightest clue where to start. "Because —" he starts, his tone of voice wavering as the words that are supposed to follow don't naturally arise. He needs a lie. He needs a good goddamn lie, but he's blanking. "Well, what kinda question is that, man, just—"

"What, did you not hear me?" Harrington snaps back, eyes narrowed.

"I heard you just fine, asshole," Billy says automatically. Something in Harrington's posture seems to straighten then, like all his plainly-held suspicions have been validated by a single flare of Billy's temper. "Fuck, I just— we're headed to same place after this right? Max won't let me hear the end of it if she finds out I let her friends go without a ride. Besides, it'll be a cold day in hell when I drive them around in *my* car."

"Right. Of course it all boils back to you. I'm just the chauffeur," Harrington says, sounding sharp. "Fuck me, I guess."

"I didn't say that. You can't just put words in my mouth and—"

"You *just said* this is because of Max," he replies, raising his voice. "You said that if you don't help me, she'll—"

"I know what I said!" Billy practically shrieks. "You're the one that had the nuclear meltdown, didn't you? Either I get this damn thing running or you're taking the nerd brigade home on foot."

Again, Harrington moves to roll up his window. The conversation is over now, it seems, but not before he mumbles: "At least this way I don't owe you a damn thing."

"God, it's not even about that," Billy rushes to say, before Harrington turns his face, clearly disinterested in hearing another word. Exasperated, Billy throws his hands up and immediately moves to

walk away but the reluctance registers physically, like a jolt in the body, like a spark. He could walk away now and perhaps, in all truth, he ought to. But, he *knows* there's no shaking off the infuriating sense that everything he's meant to say has come out all wrong.

A small, quiet voice in Billy's head nags at that aching feeling: what does he even *want* out of this? What in the world did he think was going to happen, isn't this as good to a rejection as Billy expected? He proved Nessen wrong. He tried his best to help Harrington and it achieved nothing. But, without much thought of consequence, Billy looks back.

If he was ever really going to leave, it's the look on Harrington's face that stops him.

The other boy must've felt the moment was over. Billy thinks that's the only way he could possibly look the way he does now, raw and cracked open and absolutely finished. He isn't throwing a fit anymore. He isn't throwing punches or kicking his feet, but it seems to Billy as though Harrington is falling to pieces now all the same. Or, Billy inwardly amends, maybe he's always looked this way. Maybe this is just the first time Billy has truly looked well enough to recognize it.

Harrington cards his hands through his hair, his brows furrowing, and his lip swells just at the corner. Between the glossy quality in his eyes now, the aimlessness of where Harrington nervously rests his hands, and the almost disgusted scrunching of his nose, Billy feels as though he shouldn't be seeing this. It's too private. It's too weak. This shouldn't be happening here, in the middle of the schoolyard parking-lot, where just anyone can see.

Billy takes as deep a breath as he can. The crisp air tastes metallic on his tongue. He nears Harrington carefully, slowly, and the quality of his voice when he speaks feels foreign without any of its usual bite. "Look, can't you just-" he begins to say, before realizing he has to raise his voice to be heard through the car window. "Can't you make it a little damn easier for me to help you?"

Harrington shakes his head, fed up with him. "Nobody asked you to."

"I know that," Billy begins, a little sharply. He takes a second. He shoves his cold hands under the pit of his arms and measures his tone. "I just- I want to. If you want or whatever." Then, after a moment's discomfort, he needlessly tacks on: "I'm real good at this shit, Harrington, honest to God."

The look he receives then is unlike anything he's ever received from Harrington before. The other boy stares at him, but there's no cruelty, no malice, no reservoir of hatred or apathy from which his consideration stems. He looks different, somehow, as though Harrington, frazzled and frayed and eyelashes still dark with half-formed tears, is the one spying onto something tender.

They don't spare each other another word. Harrington simply looks away from him, seeming to remember the situation and forcing his face stern again. Leaning forward where he sits, he reaches for the release hatch of the car and relief blooms in Billy's chest when the hood pops open at last.

It's the perfect excuse to move on without looking as though he's running away. Better still, Billy feels *comfortable* in front of the engine compartment. He's never been good at words and he's even worse at dealing with people without baring his teeth, but machines can be fixed. They can be taken apart without consequence, without grief or bitterness or blood. Spread out before Billy now is an expanse of simple parts and pieces that can be divided and rejoined in just the right way in order to attain a straightforward reward: a working car. A roaring engine. The satisfaction of having undeniably done something right.

The first few minutes Billy spends looking at Harrington's car, he has to forcefully will himself not to look up at him, not to confirm the itching suspicion that he's being stared at. But, soon enough, that double consciousness melts away. Billy proddles and pokes until, satisfaction blooming in his chest, he says: "Try turning it on again now. Lemme see what happens."

Harrington hesitates, but he does as he's told. The car whines, convulses, and fails. Billy doesn't bother hiding the grin on his face. It's so damn simple. A little louder than he needs to, a little brattishly, Harrington flatly says: "The hell are you smiling for? It's

didn't work."

"Is that how it is now, King Steve?" Billy says. "Can't smile unless I've got your express permission?"

He rolls his eyes. "Quit it with that 'King Steve' shit, man. It's getting old."

"That's funny, it *still* sounds like you're telling me what to do," he says. "You already got me slaving over your car. Now you're telling me when to smile, what I'm allowed to say. Way to give a guy the ol' bait and switch."

In apparent shock, Harrington mouthed the words 'bait and switch', eyebrows raised, as if to say the situation were the other way around. "Right. I forgot I was holding a gun to your head while you begged to help me."

Billy barks out a laugh. "*Begged* to help you? What're you smoking?"

"Can't you just let me help you? Please? *Please?*" he mimicks his voice absurdly sheepish before cracking with a snicker. "This Good Samaritan thing is a weird look on you."

"If you wanna talk shit, walking to Hawkins Middle is still on the table. Does that sound good to you, your majesty?" The smile Billy gives him is obscene and it shuts Harrington right up. "Didn't think so. Now, do you think you can stay put until I come back? No driving off?"

Harrington makes a show of flipping him off, but if there's any real sting behind it, Billy doesn't feel it. He heads back to the gymnasium, running past his teammates as unobtrusively as possible until he's made his way into the locker-room. Coach Wilson calls when Billy runs back out as quickly as he came, but Billy doesn't spare much more than an excuse shouted over his shoulder. Billy skids out of the school building, his bag newly in hand and his car keys, too, by consequence. He can *feel* Harrington watching him, his stare as crawling and apparent as an itch, so Billy gives him a reassuring wave before settling into his own car. The confusion on Harrington's face fades only once Billy drives up beside him. The hood to his own

car comes unlocked before Billy hops out of it.

With a sharp knock of Harrington's window glass, Billy asks: "You got jumper cables?"

Harrington blinks at him. "Jumper cables— is it the battery? Is that what all this is, just a dead battery?"

"Yep," he replies, punctuating the word with a pop.

"That can't be it," Harrington says, even as Billy shrugs. "I can *deal* with a dead battery, I'm not an idiot. That's not what this is."

"You better believe it, Harrington." Billy laughs. "Bet all those theatrics feel pretty stupid now, huh?"

Harrington straightens up defensively, a pink flush rising to his cheeks. He must know Billy is about to repeat his question because he cuts him off before he so much as gets a word out. "Yeah, look, I got 'em. They're in the trunk," he says, pressing a button that unlocks the trunk of the BMW with an audible click. "Just hang tight, I'll get them."

"No need," Billy assures him, already walking to the tail end of the car. "I've been out here freezing my ass off for what, ten minutes? Won't make a difference if I get 'em myself."

"No—" Harrington says, fumbling out of his seat now. The driver's seat swings upon and he nearly tumbles out of it. "No, no, no. Leave it. I'll get it."

"Let a guy do you a favor, man."

"I *said* no," he replies, voice curt enough to sting.

Billy gives him a look, but he doesn't slow. When Harrington comes pacing towards him, Billy only walks faster. His hands find the trunk door already cracked open. "What's your damage, Harrington?" he says, voice daring, a little teasing. "You got a dead body in here or something?"

"Just don't open the trunk, Billy, I swear to God—"

It's a matter of instinct, a messy cocktail of low-impulse control and curiosity. It's not the right thing to do, but it is the satisfying thing or, at least, it should be. When he throws open the hood and looks into the trunk of the car, the slanted, jeering smile on Billy's face drops. "What the fuck?"

"*I told you no*," Harrington says, voice a little hysterical. He shoves Billy hard, but it's the confused distraction that sends him tumbling backwards, not the force of it. Struck dumb, he watches as Harrington curses to himself, moving the disarray of oddities in his trunk, until he finds the jumper cables they needed. Then he slams the trunk shut. Hard. Hard enough that the entire car quakes. He marches past Billy with his eyes downcast, his mouth twisted in a sharp grimace, and for a moment Billy even think he's going to throw his hands on him. But he doesn't. He shoves past him, their shoulders clashing hard, and Harrington is angry, yes, but there's worry there, plain on his face. Paranoia. Billy only got a second's glance at what Harrington had been trying to hide, but that's enough for either of them.

Of course Billy recognized the bat. There's no forgetting the thing that nearly lopped off his livelihood, but well- who the fuck just *carries shit like that around*, all skewered through with rusted nails? There was more: chains and lighter fluid and goddamn bear traps, coated with something vile from use. There was so much black. Black like tar, like oil, like blood, maybe, but the color was all wrong. Black as pitch and rank with a stench of something bodily, something dead. Billy doesn't know how to ask about it.

When the haze of that confusion thins, Billy moves. He draws next to Harrington in front of the engine compartment, but not to speak. Certainly not to apologize. He wouldn't know how to apologize even if he wanted to, only the vaguest hint of guilt registering beneath larger, quaking motions of confusion and disgust. The best he can do is pretend not to notice how Harrington's hands shake as he stands over the engine compartment, absolutely still.

"That battery's got at least 12 volts to it. If you don't know what you're doing, you're gonna get hurt," Billy says, awkwardly hushed. He watches as Harrington's mouth thins to a harsh frown, his grip

tightening about the claps of the booster cables. Hesitation spills off of him in waves. "I could just tell you what to do, if you want."

Harrington turns on him so quick it almost makes Billy woozy. He shoves the booster-set into Billy's chest, reeling back as if disgusted by the inevitable contact. "You said you were going to fix it, didn't you? You couldn't even wait for me to hand it to you. You want it so bad, you can have it."

Billy face twists into a scowl, but he finds himself uncharacteristically stunned. It stings, more than he would like to admit, to see disdain return to Harrington's face but what else did he expect? He has no reasonable explanation for what he's done. He just knows he didn't mean for it to go this way- but how does he say that without sounding like an idiot? He focuses on the cold spreading to his fingertips instead. He lets Harrington coop himself back up in his car and Billy gets to work. It's a simple matter of using his car to boost Harrington's own and, after some tinkering around, he stands back and watches until he knows his job is just about done.

A gust of air bites at the bare skin of his legs. He'd left his bag on the gravel beside him and when Billy considers the warmth of a proper pair of jeans, he shudders. He considers where Harrington is seated and the empty space beside him and is secretly relieved when, after scooping up his bag, he reaches to find the passenger door unlocked. His pride probably couldn't suffer the indignity of asking Harrington for permission before slipping into the car.

Harrington glanced at him, an exhausted drag in his voice. "Why're you sitting here?"

"Because of that warm welcome," Billy replies, rubbing his hands violently over the heater. "And because I don't wanna freeze my nuts off waiting for your battery to start up again. We're gonna be here a while."

"I never asked you to help me," he repeats. It's the new edge in his voice now that makes Billy realize how much harmlessness was in it before. "Can't you sit in your own car?"

"The heater's busted," Billy answers, groping blindly through his bag



until his fingers land on the familiar shape of a box of Marlboros. It's not true, of course, but what Harrington doesn't know won't hurt him. "Suppose I could wait outside if you're gonna be a bitch about it. I've never had pneumonia before."

Harrington sucks his teeth, but Billy can see his resolve crumbling. "I guess it's fine."

Billy takes out his open pack of cigarettes before shaking the box in Harrington's direction, as close to a peace offering as they're going to get. "Want one?"

"That your way of seeing if you can smoke in my car?"

"It's my way of offering you a smoke, but suit yourself." Billy taps a cigarette out of the box and dips it into the lighter socket of the car before placing it between his lips, the embers at the end of it glowing briefly in his eyes. Harrington tenses when he reaches across the dashboard, but its preemptive- Billy only gives the emergency lights button a good jab of his thumb. "You might wanna get familiar with the concept of turning your lights off when you park your car."

"I *did* turn them off," Harrington says, offended. "I always do."

Billy takes a long drag. "That's not what your car's been saying."

"My bad, I forgot you doubled as a mechanic when you're not clocking in hours as the resident asshole."

"I'm a man of many talents." Billy cracks the window open, the rush of cold air wonderful against the stuffy heat inside, and watches as tendrils of smoke dissolve and fade away. "Besides, not all of us have money to throw at repair shops."

"I just don't have the know-how, okay? My old man never bothered to teach me," Harrington says, more than a little defensively. "It's got nothing to do with money."

"You're sitting in a BMW, Harrington. I'd say that has a little something to do with money."

"It's not the important thing," he replies thoughtlessly, withering

under Billy's incomprehensive, scornful stare.

"You can't take any of it with you. That's your next line, ain't it?" Billy says, a curl of smoke escaping his lips and spiraling in the air between them. "Speaking of which, are you getting paid to hang around kids all day or is that some sorta problem you've got?"

"No, I don't have a *problem*, Jesus Christ," Harrington groans. "Those kids get into a lotta shit, alright? They just- they need someone holding down base. Nobody's really looking out for them." His eyes narrow warningly in Billy's direction. "No smart comments. I can practically see you thinking up something shitty to say."

Billy raises his eyebrows. "I was just gonna say if you're good at something, you shouldn't do it for free."

He scoffs. "Who says I'm good at it?"

"Max does," Billy answers simply. "It's all she ever talks about these days. You, that gang of losers she hangs out with, and, I dunno, that weird-ass game of theirs. Dungeons and Daggers."

"Dungeons and *Dragons* ," Harrington corrects, a little too quickly, rubbing his thumb on the surface of the steering wheel in idle circles. Billy wonders if he can feel his eyes following the motion, or if he's really as oblivious as he seems. "How's Max doing, actually?"

Billy tries to ease out the natural impulse to tense. "I don't know what you mean."

"Sure you do," Harrington says. "She's not avoiding the boys anymore. She's actually picking her head up again and that's 'cause she's back to dressing how she likes. What'd it take for her parents to get over it?"

In lieu of an answer, Billy simply holds his cigarette between his lips and takes hold of his bag, unzipping it to show Harrington where her clothes lie stuffed in his bag. "They're not. She's just learned how to sneak around."

Harrington looks at him then, really looks at him- staring as if

considering him for the first time. It's the first time he's looked to Billy without a trace of aversion. "Cause you taught her how," he says, surprise imperfectly suppressed in his voice. "You're helping her."

Billy frowns. "Well, sure, I guess. I mean, not really."

The other boy nods. He's thinking something, Billy knows he is, but he doesn't speak it. He only sits upright, leaning back in his car seat. "What do you think is gonna happen when they find out?"

Of course Billy knows. He'll get his ass beat to high hell. They'll knuckle down on watching Max, on making sure she's got no way around the plans they have for her. It'll be torture for the two of them, no doubt about it, but Billy feigns ignorance. "Guess we'll find out when we get there," he says. "I just know it won't be pretty."

"Can't you talk to them?"

Billy laughs. "You think we'd be doing this shit if they were the talking type? Max has no idea what she's dealing with here. Give it a few weeks, I promise they'll find something else to pick at her about. There's no end to this stuff." He releases another lungful of smoke, before turning to look at the boy sitting beside him. "I've been putting up with this shit longer than she's been born. There's no talking to people like them."

Harrington looks uncomfortable, like he's trying to find the right words to say. When he bites the swell of his bottom lip, Billy tries not to notice. "Sheesh," he says, "that sounds like a real bitch of a situation." Then, he motions vaguely at Billy. "Explains a lot, though."

Billy shrugs, flashing an easy, slanted smile. "Pressure makes diamonds, amigo."

Harrington shakes his head, shifting where he sits, and closing his eyes. It should signal the end of the conversation, but all it does is draw Billy's attention to the strange shape of his hooded eyes, to the way dark eyelashes rest against his mole-spotted cheeks. Harrington yawns, rubbing his face languidly, and Billy must've gotten lost either

in the easy habit of smoking or the thoughtless impulse to look at him, because Steve opens his eyes to find him staring. Billy looks for something to say immediately, anything really, and he blurts: "What's the story with the narcoleptic act, huh?"

His brow crinkles with confusion. "What?"

"I mean, all the yawning and shit," he says. "Every time I look at you, you're either asleep or just about there."

"Stop looking at me then," Harrington replies, crossing his arms. Billy forces his shoulders lax; it's generic enough of a response that it doesn't have to mean anything dangerous. "I don't sleep much," he goes onto explain. "I mean, through the night."

"So, is that what this whole meltdown was about? All the bitchiness earlier, too?" Billy says, knowing he shouldn't, knowing he's digging in too deep. "All this cause you need a nap."

"It's not *just* that, asshole. You've got no damn idea what I've got on my plate, so quit acting like you do," Harrington snaps back. "And I don't need a nap, okay? It's not like that. I get these- these really fucked dreams. You try getting some rest when your brain's dead set on giving Hitchcock a run for his money."

There are a few seconds of silence between them until, as if he were studying Billy's expression for some sort of tell, Harrington says: "What, you're not gonna give me heat about that, too? Make some joke about how I'm pussy cause I can't handle a few nightmares?"

Billy takes the last drag of his cigarette before flipping it out the window, watching with vague satisfaction when it lands far, far off on the pavement. "You're pussy, Harrington, no question. But, shit like that...." Billy stops and reconsiders his words, discomfited at this tone they've created now, where fragile things can be spoke aloud. "I'm pretty sure I read somewhere that you can't go 72 hours without sleep or else you go batshit crazy."

"No kidding?" Harrington says, eyes round with surprise. "You read?"

Billy snorts. "Yeah, dickhead, I'm not Tommy."

His lips quirk up at that. "You're a real equal opportunity asshole, aren't you?"

"Actually, I'm a real peach to everyone else, I just hate you," he replies, outright smirking now. "You're special."

Billy isn't entirely sure why he makes that joke. Even if the boy beside him shrugs it off without so much as a second thought, Billy doesn't have quite as much luck. Unsettled with himself, Billy turns his focus outward instead; the sun has already set, casting everything a cool blue. Inside the gymnasium, Coach Wilson is probably offering his usual train of supportive shouting as the team fumbles through their last sprint of exercises.

When he moves the rear-view mirror, Billy gets sight of Harrington beside him, his eyes closed, his arms crossed comfortably over his chest. Something feels eased between them, in these few quiet moments shared in the car, and Billy can't explain how this happened. Sure, he can trace the missteps and arguments that got them here. The BMW's hood is still popped. Their cars are still connected as Harrington's battery slowly but surely comes to life. But, this isn't how things are supposed to go between them: proximity without injury, interaction without the insinuation of violence, conflict or shame.

It dawns on Billy then that he doesn't know what to do with the companionable silence that's settled between them. So, of course, it can't last. Why would it? They're not friends. They're not even *friendly*. Billy reminds himself that there is a clear objective at hand here and, come to think of it, the battery is probably done charging. He opens the passenger door and shuts it firmly behind him, not enough to slam the door but certainly with enough force to make Harrington jump. Billy gives the engine compartment a close look, towing the booster cables away, and when he gives the word, Harrington gives the ignition a twist of the key.

There's no missing the flash of that bright, excited smile on Harrington's face. He practically jumps out of his seat, rushing to to rest his hands gratefully on the purring surface of the BMW. Billy realizes he's staring only when Harrington whips around to face him.

“You’re not listening,” he says, with all the annoyance of someone repeating themselves. “It’s a legit question. Was all this supposed to make up for beating the crap outta me? Is that what you think?” Billy feels his nose crinkle up at the suggestion. Before he can come up with a response, Harrington tacks on: “Because this doesn’t mean we’re even.”

Well, fuck him for saying that. He has no idea what that night was about, not really, and Billy doesn’t need it waved over his head- not by Max, not by Coach or Diana, and absolutely not by Harrington, the worst reminder of all he did wrong. Billy tries to pull a strangled breath out of his chest, tight with frustration. “No, that’s not- that’s not what this is, Harrington.”

He doesn’t know what exactly *this* is, of course, but that’s another problem entirely. More importantly, it’s a problem he isn’t willing to deal with, much less aloud and in front of this bruised and tired-eyed boy; when Harrington turns away from him, dissuaded by such a half-assed answer, Billy slings his bag over his shoulder and heads to his own car. A glance at his wristwatch only confirms what he’s long suspected: Max is waiting for her ride.

“It’s Steve,” Harrington then, rather abruptly. “I know you’ve got a hard-on for that whole-” he gestures sweepingly at Billy’s form, “*Rebel without a Cause* vibe you got going on, but you just spent half an hour fixing my car. Besides that, we’re partners.”

“We’re *not* partners,” Billy says. The correction comes out a little sharper than he meant it to and Harrington- no, *Steve*- registers Billy’s tone with a frown.

“Okay, well, *whatever* we are, we’re gonna be seeing a lot of each other for a while. So, quit it with the whole ‘Harrington’ thing, alright? And none of that ‘King Steve’ bullshit either. It’s Steve. Just Steve.”

It’s not alright, but how exactly is Billy supposed to say that? *Excuse you, but I’ve spent a fuck ton of time building these walls, thanks but no thanks?* So, Billy doesn’t say anything. He opens the door to his car instead, throwing his bag inside, and thinks on every single reason why he’d prefer to avoid a first-name basis with Steve Harrington at

all costs. “Well, *Just Steve*,” Billy says, “since you wanna get all personal, are we gonna talk about whatever the fuck is going on in your trunk?”

It’s the wrong thing to say. Of course it is. Something in Steve changes, like a door slamming shut in Billy’s face; disappointment and embarrassment settle where a naive friendliness was held. “No, we’re not talking about that,” he manages to say, voice curt. “I can’t believe I— you know what? Just forget I ever said anything.”

Fuck. *Fuck* . This isn’t what Billy wanted, it really isn’t. His grip on the frame of his car door tightens until his knuckles go white, until it hurts. This is just his personally-crafted brand of idiocy. This is, as Neil would say, Billy’s knack for letting his mouth run past the point of doing him any good. But, that can’t be it. He’s got to do something. *Anything* .

“I got this theory about Hawkins,” he blurts out, floundering for a way to make things better. “About all the weird shit that keeps happening around here. You wanna hear it?”

Steve goes very, very still. His earth-brown eyes go wide, his focus whittled down as if whatever Billy has to say now is the most important thing in the world.

“I think —” Billy starts, taking another moment to organize his thoughts. “I think a town full of people trying this hard to come off as normal gotta have a shit ton to hide. I’ve moved around some. I’ve seen things. I’ve never seen a place so obsessed with saving face like this one. Everybody wants to be so *normal* , so goddamn *good* . When some kid goes missing and their mom goes schizo or some dyke gets axed- well, I figure all that muck has gotta come out somehow.”

Steve looks at him, like he can’t quite believe what he’s hearing. “Is that what you think?”

“I’d bet money on it,” Billy tells him. “Whatever it is you got going on in that car of yours— maybe that’s just your brand of fucked up. Can’t pretend my shit’s any better, I guess, judging by that busted lip of yours. As far as I’m concerned, I never saw a thing.”

"You're serious?" Steve asks, eying him suspiciously. "Simple as that?"

Billy takes a breath, bracing himself for what he's about to say. "No questions asked." Then, as an afterthought, he says: "Just do yourself a favor and keep that trunk locked. Otherwise, next thing you know, people'll start to think *you're* the fuck up of the town."

Steve looks at him, awash with relief, and he almost— *almost* smiles. "When you put it that way," he says, with a sort of stage nonchalance, "I got nothing to worry about so long as you're reigning champ."

Billy snorts. "Yeah, well, don't get too comfortable," Billy says, looking out towards the road, scanning it for traffic. "I'm not sticking around here for long."

"Really?" he says around an exhale. Billy can't imagine any reason this would come as any surprise, really, but Steve nods to himself again, looking elsewhere, thinking on something. Well, Billy moves right along. Max will have been waiting for him now and there's only so much time he can waste before it becomes an issue back home. Steve does the same; this strange episode is truly over, completed in full. When Steveducks into his own car, Billy does the same. But just as Billy is about to close the car door, his focus no longer on his teammate and instead on the key, the ignition, the remains of the day- just then, Steve calls his name.

"Billy," Steve says, holing the driver's seat door out so that he can speak. God, what a thing: to hear his name in that boy's mouth, to want to dislodge it from there, to want to- secretly, terribly- hear it spoken again. Steve hesitates, measuring his words, settling on two simple ones: "Thank you."

Billy frowns and he realizes he has nothing to say to him. No excuse for helping him after a brief and terrible history of chaos, no apologies for that past turbulence or Billy's certainty that more of it is to come, and no easy way to say 'you're welcome' without it feeling wrong, mechanical, as foreign on his tongue as an unknown language. Billy shakes his head and manages to murmur a clumsy



'whatever', but it must go unheard. Steve closes his door. His car comes to life and it reverses smoothly, before leading out of the parking lot and down the familiar path Billy will travel himself in only moments.

He does the same, except more quickly, more violently, railing against the idea of following Steve's lead- when he speeds past Steve's BMW, Billy's own car roars painfully loud as it edges past him and leaves him behind. Billy makes a point of not looking back. He doesn't check his rearview mirror for the familiar rust-maroon shade of his car roars. He doesn't need to. He shouldn't want to, either, and he doesn't— there must be victory in that, surely, but Billy feels something open up inside all the same and it aches.

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

I promised you guys: I didn't forget this is a harringrove fic! We're gonna get Steve and I know, I know, I know we're due some of those good, good Steve/Billy interactions. I don't think I even anticipated it taking this long, but the story made it's own demands: I just couldn't imagine Steve so soon forgiving Billy for that degree of violence towards him or menacing towards the kids. I couldn't write a way in which these two steam-line into good graces, esp when Billy in canon so much seems to mimic his abusive father's love for self-justification.

But, I sure do hope these last chapters have felt as shifting to you as they feel to me. The tides are changing here. Steve's conceived notions of Billy are due to keep on shifting and Billy, I think, is gonna keep losing out on bets against the school counselor :) I'm really excited to FINALLY get to call Steve by his name in narration, too, haha. What a relief. Did you catch, btw, the "no questions" bit Billy borrowed from Diana? That's gonna open the door to one of the earliest concepts I had of this fic months ago....

As always, please let me know what you thought of the chapter- your feedback is the lifeblood of my

stamina and hopeful when it comes to this story. I hope this chapter was worth the wait ♥◻

**Author's Note:**

[I've got a running tag for this fic on tumblr.](#) You can also reach out to me there!